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THESIS

EXCELLENCE IN TACTICAL FIGHTER SQUADRONS

by

Hugh A. Forde

June 1985

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ABSTRACT - (CONTINUED)

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All senior officers agreed that the level of performance among all squadrons in TAC is extremely high, nevertheless, there are some squadrons which are clearly outperforming the others. Based on their nominations, seven excellent squadrons were identified. This research identified certain common attributes among these four excellent squadrons. These are summarized in Chapters VII to XII, "The Facets Of Excellence."

Findings indicate that some items of a non-quantifiable nature are extremely important in recognizing, achieving and maintaining excellence in the tactical fighter environment.

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Excellence In Tactical Fighter Squadrons

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF SCIENCE IN MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to identify the attributes of excellence in tactical fighter squadrons and how that excellence is achieved. The research question was: do the top performing tactical fighter squadrons share common attributes of excellence? If so, what are those attributes?

The research followed a two part qualitative methodology. Part I consisted of interviews with 51 general officers and colonels currently assigned to key leadership positions in Tactical Air Command. Each officer was asked for his definition of an excellent tactical fighter squadron, and to identify squadrons he considers to be excellent. The research indicates that TAC's senior officers have a clear consistent vision of excellence, which goes beyond the quantitative monthly statistics. The senior officers, in defining excellence, also focus on a range of qualitative issues. Chapters II to V, "The Excellence Criteria" focuses on these issues.

All senior officers agreed that the level of performance among all squadrons in TAC is extremely high, nevertheless, there are some squadrons which are clearly outperforming the others. Based on their nominations, seven excellent squadrons were identified. Four were visited and a cross section of their personnel interviewed. This research identified certain common attributes among these four excellent squadrons. These are summarized in Chapters VII to XII, "The Facets of Excellence."

Findings indicate that some items of a non-quantifiable nature are extremely important in recognizing, achieving and maintaining excellence in the tactical fighter environment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|------|---|----|
| I. | INTRODUCTION | 11 |
| II. | SQUADRON LEADERSHIP | 16 |
| | A. CREDIBILITY - RESPECTED AS AN AVIATOR | 17 |
| | B. DEDICATED TO THE SQUADRON | 18 |
| | C. OUT FRONT, VISIBLE | 19 |
| | 1. Sets Standards | 20 |
| | 2. Enforcing Standards | 20 |
| | D. MAKES TOUGH DECISIONS | 21 |
| | 1. Talent vs. Longevity | 21 |
| | 2. Good Old Joe | 22 |
| | E. RECOGNIZES/REWARDS EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE | 22 |
| | F. TUNED INTO SIGNALS | 24 |
| | 1. Know People As Individuals | 25 |
| | 2. Situational Awareness | 26 |
| | G. QUALITY LEADERSHIP - TOP TO BOTTOM | 26 |
| III. | MISSION - PROFESSIONAL EXECUTION | 29 |
| | A. SENSE OF MISSION | 30 |
| | B. GOALS | 31 |
| | C. THE SQUADRON HAS PRIORITIES | 31 |
| | D. REALISTIC TRAINING | 32 |
| | 1. All Sorts Of Conditions | 33 |
| | 2. "Anybody Can Come" | 33 |
| | E. ATTENTION TO DETAILS | 34 |
| | 1. Deployments - A Command Performance | 34 |
| | 2. Too Much Red On The Schedule? | 34 |
| | F. OPERATING OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE | 35 |
| | 1. A Good Squadron Getting Better | 35 |

| | | |
|-------|---|----|
| | 2. Take, Borrow, Or Steal Training | 36 |
| | G. WHAT ABOUT STATISTICS? | 37 |
| IV. | MUTUAL SUPPORT | 38 |
| | A. NEVER LOST A WINGMAN! | 38 |
| | B. SOCIAL ACTIVITIES | 39 |
| | C. THE MAINTENANCE SIDE OF EXCELLENCE | 39 |
| V. | THE THUNDERBIRD SYNDROME--THEY LOOK SHARP | 41 |
| | A. HOUSEKEEPING AND PERSONAL APPEARANCE | 41 |
| | B. SELF HELP | 42 |
| | C. "THAT LOOK IN THEIR EYES" | 42 |
| | D. LOOKING GOOD VS. BEING GOOD | 43 |
| VI. | SUMMARY OF PART I | 44 |
| | A. THE EXCELLENCE CRITERIA | 44 |
| | B. ON TO THE EXCELLENT SQUADRONS | 45 |
| VII. | EXCELLENT COMMANDER EQUALS EXCELLENT SQUADRON | 47 |
| | A. CO HAS A PLAN AND HE EXECUTES | 47 |
| | B. CO CARES | 48 |
| | 1. 10-Hour Duty Day | 49 |
| | 2. Improving On The Past | 49 |
| | C. LOYAL TO HIS PEOPLE | 50 |
| | D. LEAD BY EXAMPLE | 50 |
| | E. COMMANDER IS HIGHLY RESPECTED | 51 |
| | 1. Respected As Fighter Pilot | 52 |
| | 2. Respected As A Person | 52 |
| | F. DIRECT/HONEST COMMUNICATION | 53 |
| | 1. Mass Communication | 53 |
| | 2. Newsletters | 54 |
| | G. A WORD ABOUT STYLE | 54 |
| VIII. | A WINNING ATTITUDE | 56 |
| | A. WE ARE THE BEST | 56 |
| | B. NO BOASTING ABOUT IT | 56 |

| | | | |
|-----|----|--|----|
| | C. | THE WAY THEY TALK ABOUT THE SQUADRON | 57 |
| | D. | WELCOME TO OUR SQUADRON | 57 |
| | E. | WINNING ATTITUDE PROGRAMMED FROM DAY ONE | 58 |
| | F. | GETTING THE "ALPHA" | 58 |
| | G. | EXCELLENT BUT NOT PERFECT | 60 |
| IX. | | COMBAT CAPABILITY IS FIRST PRIORITY | 61 |
| | A. | EMPHASIS ON REALISM | 62 |
| | B. | ATTENTION TO DETAIL | 62 |
| | 1. | Mobility | 63 |
| | 2. | Ground Attack Tactics (GAT) Program | 63 |
| | C. | OPERATIONAL READINESS INSPECTION (ORI)--FEW SURPRISES | 64 |
| | D. | CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION ENCOURAGED | 64 |
| | E. | FOCUS ON MISSION | 65 |
| | F. | NOT EVERYTHING BUT SOME THINGS WELL | 66 |
| | G. | SAFETY ATTITUDE | 66 |
| | 1. | Off The Schedule, No Questions Asked | 67 |
| | 2. | Safe versus Oversafe | 68 |
| X. | | TEAMWORK AND CARING--THE WE-ATTITUDE | 69 |
| | A. | TEAMWORK | 69 |
| | 1. | Maintenance - A Critical Relationship | 70 |
| | 2. | Enlisted Support Is Also Critical | 71 |
| | B. | TEAMWORK VS. COMPETITION | 71 |
| | C. | CARING | 72 |
| | 1. | Socializing As A Team | 72 |
| | 2. | SOS, APR's And OER's | 73 |
| XI. | | LEADERSHIP EVERYWHERE | 75 |
| | A. | FLIGHT COMMANDER DECISIONMAKING | 75 |
| | 1. | Eye-Watering Flexibility | 76 |
| | 2. | Making The Schedule | 77 |
| | B. | COMMANDER/OPERATIONS OFFICER RELATIONSHIP . . | 78 |
| | C. | PROFICIENCY ADVANCEMENT | 79 |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|-----|
| D. | LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT - IN HOUSE | 79 |
| XII. | HERITAGE AND HIGH STANDARDS | 81 |
| A. | HERITAGE | 81 |
| 1. | Traditions | 83 |
| 2. | Heroes And Living Legends | 84 |
| B. | HIGH STANDARDS | 85 |
| 1. | The Commander | 85 |
| 2. | Squadron Pride | 86 |
| 3. | Peer Pressure | 87 |
| XIII. | SUMMARY | 88 |
| XIV. | RECOMMENDATIONS | 91 |
| A. | TO TACTICAL AIR COMMAND | 91 |
| 1. | Reflect Excellence Criteria In Squadron Commander's Evaluation | 91 |
| 2. | Emphasize Flying Activities More In Promotion Decisions | 92 |
| 3. | Pass The Word On Excellence--Firsthand | 93 |
| 4. | Promote And Emphasize Traditions And Heritage | 94 |
| 5. | Exploit Creativity And Talent In The Squadron | 95 |
| 6. | Recognize And Acknowledge The Excellence Family | 96 |
| B. | FOR FURTHER RESEARCH | 96 |
| APPENDIX A: | METHODOLOGY | 98 |
| A. | PART I--THE EXCELLENCE CRITERIA | 99 |
| B. | PART II--THE STORY OF EXCELLENCE | 101 |
| C. | ANALYSIS OF DATA | 102 |
| D. | EXCELLENT SQUADRONS NOT IDENTIFIED | 103 |
| APPENDIX B: | A TYPICAL FIGHTER SQUADRON | 104 |
| LIST OF REFERENCES | | 105 |

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I. INTRODUCTION

EXCELLENCE: The state, quality, or condition of
excelling; preeminence.

Excel: To be better than; surpass; outdo.

Preeminence: Superior to or notably above all others;
outstanding.

Everyone in the tactical fighter community can readily agree with the above definition of the word excellence.¹ A more difficult task is identifying excellence, and the factors and conditions which lead to or result in excellence. In other words, what makes one tactical fighter squadron "notably above all others?" How do you judge whether a tactical fighter squadron has achieved "a state of preeminence?"

As part of my Master's program, I had the opportunity to sit down, one on one, with 51 of Tactical Air Command's (TAC) most senior, experienced leaders and ask these questions. Short of actual combat, the best qualified to judge excellence are these officers, who specify the criteria, i.e., the standards of excellence, and evaluate squadron performance accordingly. In all, I visited 12 TAC Continental U.S (CONUS) bases and interviewed 9 general officers, among them, the Commander in Chief, Tactical Air Command (CINCTAC), VICE CINCTAC, and Commanders of the 9th and 12th Nnumbered Air Forces, as well as 32 colonels (O-6), 10 of whom at the time of this study were tactical fighter wing commanders.

¹Taken from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1970.

From the responses I received, it is evident that TAC's leadership is unified and clear in their vision of excellence in tactical fighter squadrons. They were in total agreement that the level of performance across TAC is extremely high in all squadrons. Nevertheless, they also agreed that there are some fighter squadrons which are clearly outperforming the others. The senior officers did not define excellence in terms of any one single element, they each gave certain criteria, or yardstick measures which they use in judging excellence. When asked to describe and explain what they looked for in evaluating a squadron as excellent, comments such as the following were typical:

" . . . I don't judge on one thing--I have a whole group of criteria that I judge a squadron by"

" . . . we tend to focus sometimes on how well we fly airplanes and those kinds of things, but I focus on a broad range of things to look at how well a squadron is doing."

What criteria are these senior officers referring to? What yardstick measures do they have in mind when judging excellence? Not surprisingly, squadron leadership emerged as the single most important factor or attribute responsible for excellence, in the eyes of TAC's senior officers. Nor did the senior officers lose track of the importance of mission performance as the final judge of how well a squadron is doing. But it's more than just doing the job each month. The officers interviewed noted a difference between the excellent and the average squadrons--the excellent squadrons are able to execute their taskings "with a touch of class", they are able to make it look easy.

But what about other factors which are commonly thought to be a part of excellence in a fighter squadron? What part does luck play in achieving excellence? Is excellence a

matter of location? That is, do the squadrons located near large civilian communities or those colocated at headquarters bases have an edge over those based in the more remote locations? Also, how does the mission and type of aircraft being flown affect excellence? Does the commander of an air-to-air unit flying the newer high technology single seat aircraft have an edge over his counterpart commanding a unit flying an older weapon system, on a less glamorous mission?

The answer to these questions, from the 51 senior officers I interviewed was a consistent and definite NO! Each acknowledged that luck, location, type of aircraft and mission could be barriers to excellence but only if the squadron leadership allowed them to be. For example, although some of the senior officers believed that luck was "10 to 15 percent of it," a more typical comment was: "There are a lot of things you can attribute to luck . . . but an awful lot of it, a lot of luck, is built through good discipline." Or ". . . leadership in the organization is the key to the business, it's not luck."

Another interesting question is, how long will it take to identify a squadron as excellent? There was some disagreement on this issue. Some felt they would have to spend time flying with a squadron, that it would take more than just a walk up and a short interview, however, the majority were aligned with the opinion of a particular general officer who noted that "I can tell within a few minutes of arrival at curbside, whether this squadron is excellent."

The point is that whether or not an excellent squadron could be identified as such at curbside or whether it required several days inside the squadron, the senior officers all agreed that some squadrons are noticeably excellent.

In Part I of this report, I have summarized the senior officers' views, based on careful analysis of the interview transcripts.

After each interview, I asked each officer to identify tactical fighter squadrons he considered to meet his criteria of excellence. Based on their nominations, I was able to identify seven such squadrons. I later visited four of these squadrons identified as excellent. I spent time sitting in on pre-flight briefings, debriefs, played darts in the lounge, and spoke to some maintenance specialists on the flight line. But most important, I roamed the halls of these excellent squadrons interviewing their leaders and personnel about what they do.

In Part II, Chapters VII to XII, I have told their story.

I found that the excellent squadrons DO have certain commonalities in their way of doing business. In general, they behaved pretty much as the senior officers said they would. So much so, that the reader may find a degree of redundancy in reading Part I, the senior officers' views and Part II, the story of excellence as told by the squadrons.

The author has made no attempt to eliminate this redundancy, since such redundancy reflects the commonality of views between the senior officers and the personnel in the excellent squadrons. Parts I and II were treated as separate and independent units to give the reader a complete picture of what TAC's senior leadership is looking for in excellent tactical fighter squadrons. After all, it's not everyday one gets the opportunity to hear the candid views of 51 general officers and colonels. Likewise, the reader is afforded a clear description of what the excellent squadrons are doing to come out on top. There is much to be learned from their example!

Part I

THE EXCELLENCE CRITERIA

Interviews With TAC's Senior Leadership

II. SQUADRON LEADERSHIP

"Let me tell you, excellence in a fighter squadron boils down to the leadership of that squadron . . ."

wing director of operations (DO).

Although each officer interviewed looked at several areas in evaluating excellence in a fighter squadron, leadership emerged as the most important. Everything stemmed from good leadership. Because of the small size of the fighter squadron, the commander's influence is immediately felt. The commander can drive the squadron one way or another, from being a shining star, to down in the dumps, almost overnight. True, leadership hinges on the squadron commander, but the importance of the operations officer (ops officer) and flight commanders was not overlooked by the senior officers. It's not only good leadership at the top, it's good leadership throughout the squadron.

What are the attributes of good leadership in the eyes of TAC's senior officers? In a nutshell, the senior officers agreed that the excellent squadron commander:

- a) has credibility, he is respected as a good aviator and is dedicated to the squadron. He is willing to make the tough decisions and is fair in treatment of subordinates;
- b) his "antennae" are up. He knows his people as individuals and is sensitive to changes in the squadron which could adversely affect performance of the individual pilot ² or the squadron as a whole, he

²The word pilot, when used throughout this thesis, refers to both aircrew members, the weapon system operator included.

is out front and visible in the squadron, setting the standards and making things happen, and finally;

- c) he is conscious of creating an environment where people are encouraged and given the opportunity to excel and are rewarded for their efforts.

But this is getting ahead of the story. The next several sections detail how the senior leaders actually described excellent squadron leadership.

A. CREDIBILITY - RESPECTED AS AN AVIATOR

In evaluating the leadership of a tactical fighter squadron, the senior officers look very closely at the credibility of the leadership. Before he walks in the door, the commander has to have credibility: he has to be respected as an aviator.

The excellent squadron commander has to be a good fighter pilot. He has to have credentials. He has to have fighter time, even if most of his hours are in fighter aircraft different from what his unit is currently flying. He does not necessarily have to be top gun in his squadron but he has to know what he is doing. As one senior general officer commented, "I don't think you necessarily have to be the best pilot in the squadron, but you have to understand the business. Pilots will forgive you for anything except ignorance, he could have done something about it." But the commander must be well enough qualified in the aircraft such that he can be a role model, capable of leading his people in the air. The squadron has to be able to rely on his judgment, his decisions and his thought processes. According to the senior officers, if the leadership is not qualified you have built-in problems, i.e., cautious when aggressiveness is warranted, aggressive when he should be cautious. In other words, not able to make the right decisions.

Lack of credibility can lead to other difficulties in the squadron, especially in the case of a commander who is not the best but is "foolishly determined to prove that he is the best." This type individual will wind up cutting corners, ignoring rules and conveniently forgetting things when he makes a mistake, in order to protect his ego.

B. DEDICATED TO THE SQUADRON

"One characteristic that is indispensable is selflessness The guy is not in it for himself. If he's in it for himself, he'll destroy the unit He'll sacrifice everything in the unit for himself. The unit has had it, it's just a matter of time." This comment, from a general typifies the intensity with which most of the senior officers discussed this next aspect of leadership in excellent fighter squadrons: the commander's dedication to the unit.

The excellent squadron commander's overriding goal is to make his unit the best fighter squadron. Unlike his counterpart who is simply passing through, picking up a commander's prefix, on his way to full colonel and unwilling to rock the boat for fear of personal damage, the excellent commander is willing to make the tough decisions. He stands up for his troops and is willing to act as an insulator for his squadron, absorbing as many of the shots as he can.

At the same time he is loyal to his boss, he's loyal to the troops below. A colonel on the HQ TAC Inspector General (I.G.) staff notes that "there are commanders who seem to think that the most important thing is to react immediately to what they perceive as guidance from higher echelons." In contrast, the excellent commander "takes the input, digests it, analyzes it and figures out how that guidance applies to his organization, people and mission, then implements it."

The excellent commander's dedication is reciprocated by the squadron. "Show them dedication and loyalty and they'll give you dedication and loyalty." Indeed, the commander's dedication or lack of, is readily noticeable to the squadron itself, as well as outside observers. A wing commander asserted that "the youngest guy in the squadron to the oldest head on the wing will know it."

C. OUT FRONT, VISIBLE

"Visible," "involved," "enthusiastic," "wandering around," "active," and "out front" were some of the action words used to describe, from personal experience, commanders the senior officers considered strong. In contrast, "caretaker," "storekeeper," "ghost" and "absentee landlord" came to mind to connote the leadership of those commanders they considered weak.

A wing commander summarized his thoughts this way: "some squadrons are lead either from three rows behind or they're lead from two levels above. Now these squadrons very rarely ever become excellent squadrons. The squadron that is going to become the good squadron is the one where you have strong leaders out front."

The visibility of the leadership is also an area looked at by the TAC I.G. An I.G. colonel emphasized that, for example, during overseas deployment briefings, "you can see the strong squadron commander, up front, talking to his people, leading them through it, providing guidance and direction."

Regardless of the style of the commander, the excellent squadrons are the ones where the commander is out front and visible in the squadron providing leadership.

The leadership in excellent squadrons is not visible only during flying duty hours but anytime there's an

activity in the squadron, e.g., after duty get-togethers in the lounge, squadron picnics or any of the more formal social activities. The excellent squadron commanders take advantage of places where people find it easier to talk on an informal basis, about things that are important to them; issues they would not easily talk about otherwise. These informal exchanges are valued in the excellent squadrons.

1. Sets Standards

The commander sets the standard and, like water rising to a level, the squadron will rise to it. From the day he takes command, the commander is setting the standard for his squadron, be it a standard of mediocrity or a standard of excellence.

The squadron becomes a reflection of the commander. According to the senior officers, if you find a squadron where people are showing up for work every day disgruntled and not particularly motivated, basically you're going to find a commander of that organization being very much the same way. "And we always say in this business that the best example is the good example you set yourself." In the excellent squadrons there's no doubt in anyone's mind about what the commander's standard is: the standard is excellence, with the commander setting the example.

2. Enforcing Standards

Anybody can set standards. But according to the senior officers, the excellent commander is the one who not only sets high standards, he likewise has the courage to enforce them. This is a major discriminator of the excellent squadron: standards don't get lip service, they get enforced. As one general officer explained, this is important because "as people come up to those standards, they can't help but feel proud, and their overall

performance will improve You can see a change in an organization overnight." In other words, success breeds success, excellence breeds excellence. If squadron members don't maintain high standards, after an appropriate time, they are asked to "find employment elsewhere." Furthermore, in the excellent squadron, high standards are applied to everything, not just one or two high visibility items.

D. MAKES TOUGH DECISIONS

In the words of a three-star general, the excellent squadron commander "has the courage to set the proper example, courage to censure people that deserve to be censured, courage to criticize when criticism is necessary; courage to do the unpopular thing." In describing a particular squadron once under his command, a wing commander observed that the squadron was good but not excellent partly because "the squadron commander was a good old boy, a great pilot and a good flight lead but when it came down to making the real gutsy decisions, you know, he didn't want to be the bad guy." What these and other senior officers are talking about is courage to make the tough but critical decisions. Decisions made harder because they involve people the commander knows well. As a two-star general noted, "the fellow who wants to run an excellent outfit doesn't turn his back on the problems, he recognizes blemishes and steps up to them."

1. Talent vs. Longevity

How are flight commanders selected? What happens to the marginal performer who also happens to be a very nice guy? These are the types of questions the senior officers are asking, as part of their excellence criteria.

In the excellent squadrons, flight leads, instructor pilots, flight commanders and the heads of the various functional areas are selected based on talent, ability and display of leadership potential. It is not a matter of rank or longevity, i.e., the job does not go to the guy simply because his time has come, or because he's been in the squadron for a given number of months or years, or happens to be the most senior. The leaders are the best qualified for the job. Notwithstanding, if it becomes necessary to take someone out of a certain position for a justifiable reason, the excellent commander is willing to make that decision.

2. Good Old Joe

Good old Joe, as described by the senior officers, is the good friend and nice guy with the great personality. He is trying very hard but is simply not up to squadron standards. There are holes in his technique, he's weak in certain areas. In some squadrons, Joe is carried somewhere in the back of the squadron. The attitude is, "we're going to keep you, feed you and take care of you." In the excellent squadron, Joe is challenged. The expectation is that with extra work and attention, Joe can be improved. The belief is that the guy you think can't shine is probably the guy that if you press him, will perform and maybe excel. In the excellent squadrons, Joe is pressed.

E. RECOGNIZES/REWARDS EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE

All a soldier desires to drive him forward is recognition and appreciation for his work.

General Patton.

In the excellent squadron, the senior officers expect to find the kind of attitude expressed by General Patton,

manifested in an active formal recognition program, giving credit where credit is due, making sure that the people are being recognized for their good work. The good leader, in the eyes of the senior officers, perceives that people are looking for an opportunity to excel, to be recognized, to be determined and designated a winner. He provides occasions for this by submitting his people for Airman of the Month, Officer of the Quarter or other types of recognition/reward programs.

Recognition and reward can come in other forms, such as PME and opportunities for off duty education.

In attempting to build a strong squadron, some commanders tend to become rather narrow. They want to gather a squadron full of fast burners and shining stars, meanwhile downplaying opportunities for progression with "mission essential" excuses. Insidiously the message is permeated that to volunteer for special programs outside the squadron is to be a traitor, not a team player. The senior officers see this as a rather nearsighted approach to building excellence. It may work in the short term but the long term results will be the opposite of excellence, as the top people see the openings passing by.

In the excellent units the approach is to educate the most talented people, allow them to grow and expand, then put them back in leadership roles. According to a wing commander, "It's like spreading fertilizer--really amazing." Several years ago a squadron commander, now a general officer, learned from a Chief Master Sergeant (E-9) that if it doesn't hurt to send a person to PME, then you're sending the wrong individual. According to the Chief, the top people, by definition, are the ones in leadership positions doing the important things.

This general and others, expect that in spite of the pressures, the excellent squadron will have a well supported

recognition and reward program. Whether it's formal recognition, such as decorations and awards, attendance at PME, off duty education programs, test pilot school, Fighter Weapons Instructor School (FWIC), a good followup assignment on the wing staff, or informal pats on the back, the excellent commander is looking out for occasions to reward his people.

F. TUNED INTO SIGNALS

Tuned into signals means being situationally aware of what's going on in the squadron. After a visit to a particular squadron, a general officer had this to say about the commander who was tuned into his squadron. "I've been around the business long enough to say that when I was introduced to the commander at curbside, and chatted with him for a few minutes, and then he lead me into his squadron, there was no question of what I was going to find in that squadron He was thoroughly knowledgeable about every facet of it, about the mobility mission, about everything." The general went on to say that this commander even knew the Circular Error Probability ³ (CEP) of his pilots!

Why did this senior officer have such confidence that he had arrived at an excellent squadron after such a short time? Part of the answer is that the squadron commander demonstrated two qualities of an excellent commander: he knew his people as individuals and was aware of what was going on in his squadron.

³CEP is the bombing error. Computed based on distance from the target.

1. Know People As Individuals

The excellent commander is not simply memorizing bombing statistics, his knowledge of individual scores is a result of paying attention and listening, being aware of what is going on in the lives of his people. Not necessarily how many dollar bills the guy has in his billfold, but whether or not he has any financial, marital or other problems which will distract from concentration on flying. In short, "Recognizing when they're not 100% and beginning to stray."

It is ironic, said a senior officer, that in a few short days, six total strangers on an accident investigation board can find out more about a fatality than the people who work with him daily. This should never happen, there should be no surprises.

Knowing people as individuals also means knowing their capabilities. "I expect the squadron commander to tell me who number 12 is and who number 24 is as far as flying experience and ability. Why? Because I don't want number 36 scheduled with number 34, while number 3 is flying with number 5." According to the officer who made this observation, 34 and 36 pose a risk, because of inexperience while 3 and 5 are at risk because of possible complacency. The senior officers believe that in today's high stress tactical flying environment, "where we're often operating in the amber zone at 100 feet on a low level" the excellent squadron commander will stack the deck in his favor to avoid losing an aircraft or worst, a person.

Besides avoiding accidents, knowing people individually will pay dividends in terms of output. "Once it sinks into a person that the commander has taken the time and effort to get to know him or her I've never seen anybody yet that didn't start uphill." In the excellent squadrons

this extra effort is given, the people are willing to give more because they know the commander cares.

2. Situational Awareness

While being sensitive to the people, the excellent commander also keeps an eye on the flow of events in the organization. He sees connections between events and makes corrections before circumstances get out of hand. He accurately reads the indicators, for trends such as, too many schedule changes, to indicate that things aren't going well.

He knows the limitations of the squadron, whether it's a limitation due to building design, or difficulty in getting range time and is constantly looking out for ways of reducing the effects of those limitations, to make the job as easier and as fun as possible. "I think the opportunity to have fun is created by the guy who can stabilize the daily environment in the squadron and reduce the turmoil to a level so that the fun part of the job can show through," were the thoughts of a wing commander.

G. QUALITY LEADERSHIP - TOP TO BOTTOM

"There is one common ingredient throughout any good organization and that's leadership. And it's not just good leadership at the top, it's good leadership throughout."

The senior officers, like the lieutenant general who made the above comments left no doubt that leadership is a key ingredient in an excellent squadron. So far we've been looking at leadership at the commander level and although the individual commander's leadership is mightily important, the excellent squadron commander's leadership is supported and enhanced by a cadre of intermediate leaders, primarily the operations officer and the flight commanders. There is strong leadership top to bottom.

This explains why the excellent squadrons can send their people to PMÉ. Even though it will hurt, the organization does not fall apart because there are other strong leaders to step in. The same is true when the higher echelons are taken away, such as during deployments and other TDY (temporary duty) away from the home base. They can still operate because the intermediate leaders are used to making decisions.

Top to bottom leadership starts with a tight working relationship between the commander and the operations officer; the commander setting policy and the operations officer (ops officer) executing that policy, each in concert with the other. Some senior officers called this the "one-two punch." There is a clear separation of duties, not just on paper but in practice.

Top to bottom leadership at the flight commander level means a traditional vs. functional flight organizational structure where flight commanders are leaders, not supervisors, having responsibility for their people, including flight scheduling. "I strongly endorse a schedule where a flight commander can make the decisions about who flies, when and what kind of missions they fly." Another wing commander likes to see flight commanders given responsibility for their flights so that the flight can learn, and operate as a combat team.

At the individual level, rather than making all the decisions himself, the excellent commander specifies the goal, giving the individual the opportunity to formulate a program and make mistakes but more important, to learn from those mistakes; to understand what's involved in making decisions. This means delegating responsibility to the lowest levels. To illustrate his concern over what he called the tendency of the hierarchy to draw authority to the top, a senior officer noted that "we trust pilots

implicitly to get into front line equipment and fly all over the country with live guns and ordinance, yet when they get on the ground, we make all the decisions." "One of our greatest responsibilities" added a wing commander "is to teach those who are behind us so that when we turn the reigns of leadership over to those individuals, they are prepared, and understand the philosophies and techniques that we've already found to be successful. The ability and initiative is there, it has to be brought out and exercised. This doesn't happen everywhere, it does in the excellent squadron."

III. MISSION - PROFESSIONAL EXECUTION

"All the squadrons in TAC can do their mission--some are doing it better than others."

When the senior officers look at mission performance, the first question is, are they performing the mission? The next question is, how well are they performing that mission? This leads into the second facet of the excellent squadron: regardless of the mission or the conditions they're operating under, the excellent squadron will execute that tasking in a professional manner.

The senior officers look very hard not only at the actual operations and maintenance results but also at HOW those results are achieved. The excellent squadrons not only do the basics well but they have the ability to do their job in a thoroughly professional style; they do it with a touch of class; they make it look effortless. In the eyes of a wing commander, "In the fighter business today, there's a lot of stress and strain and we ask people to put in very long hours under very difficult conditions. The ability to do that and still maintain high standards and a sense of esprit de corps, is the fundamental difference between . . . whether a squadron stands heads and shoulders above other organizations."

This high level of mission performance comes about because the squadron has a sense of mission, challenging goals are established training is realistic, priorities are set and there is constant attention to detail.

A. SENSE OF MISSION

Do they have a sense of mission or are they just working a job? The difference is subtle, yet significant.

This starts with the squadron commander. He has to have a clear idea of where he's going or the squadron can't get there. The commander has to have read and be conversant with his DOC (Desired Operational Capability) statement, which provides the squadron's charter, the essence of his job. It's taken for granted that everyone knows the mission yet the I.G. are sometimes surprised at "the number of times that we find people who don't know what their job is--they don't know what their tasking is--they haven't read the DOC statement." Another senior officer added, "he's got to know and understand the mission, then work hard on internal P/R so that people see the overall picture and understand how important the mission is." Not everyone has the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) role, but everyone has an important function. The excellent squadrons see their mission, no matter what it is, as essential.

Just as important, at the individual level, each person from the lowest to the highest ranking member of the squadron, understands and can articulate his/her role and its contribution to the squadron's overall mission capability.

The senior officers also stress that in addition to KNOWING your particular task, it is important to spend most of your time striving to perfect performance of that task rather than worrying about someone else's mission. Several officers used football illustrations. "If you're a tackle, you worry about being the best tackle, you worry about tackle-related things rather than trying to double as quarterback." The same holds true in the fighter squadron. "If he's a wingman, most of his time should be concerned

with being the best wingman in the squadron rather than doing the job of the flight lead, otherwise his attentions are diverted from where they need to be at the moment." The flight lead should be the best possible flight lead, the wingman should be the best possible wingman.

B. GOALS

Each member of the squadron knows what his/her mission is in terms of specific, measurable, goals. The goals are attainable but require hard work and are challenging. When goals are reached, excellence is reached and people have a good feeling about themselves, further adding to the attitude that "we are good because we can meet these tough goals."

The simple conclusion is that the excellent squadron has a sense of mission, challenging goals, and people are inspired to accept these challenges.

C. THE SQUADRON HAS PRIORITIES

The excellent squadron commanders have also made the decisions on where the squadron's efforts will be focussed, based on his assessment of where the squadron is and where it is going. The commander lets his people know that of the 100 things to be done tomorrow, clearly some are more important than others. Everyone knows what the key items are, and these key items are done well. According to a general officer with considerable I.G. experience, the outifts that did especially well on inspections, were the ones where the commander had "guts enough" to stand up and say "these are at the bottom of my list and we're going to get to them when we do all these other important things."

Setting priorities involves making tough decisions because it may sometimes call for the commander to be

willing to "absorb some shots." Occasionally there is a good reason for not getting everything done. The excellent commander has the guts to go in to his boss and take a hit rather than taking unnecessary risks at the end of the month.

One senior officer noted that he's not going to fire a squadron commander who gets a writeup because his forms and publications were not in order, "... but if I've got a squadron commander who's not training his people, I'm going to find another man." In the excellent squadrons it is rare that they will not be able to accomplish their taskings. The difference is that when necessary, the commander is willing to make that tough decision and say "hey boss"

D. REALISTIC TRAINING

The excellent squadrons, in the vision of TAC's senior leadership, are dedicated to realistic training. These squadrons don't train for the sake of training. They train for the specific purpose of preparing for their wartime mission. "They're not just filling squares, they're employing those airplanes in practical scenarios, in practical training exercises that enhance the skills, reactions, reflexes and overall proficiencies of the aircrews. Rather than "launching the airplanes and turning JP4 [jet fuel] into noise and smoke, or blowing holes in the sky" the excellent squadrons are training on the right things and making maximum use of training time under all sorts of conditions. The emphasis is on training under "all sorts of conditions."

1. All Sorts Of Conditions

An officer on a wing staff related that of the three fighter squadrons in the wing, there was one squadron willing to go out and try anything and everything under all weather conditions, in their training efforts. While that squadron was always not number one in gunnery competition, they tended to have better scores than the others when Turkey Shoots "came up on bad weather days. He admitted, "truthfully, I'd rather have that squadron in combat over the one that only does well in the structured environment." The excellent squadrons will do well under the stress of combat because their training is realistic "as if for war," they're not playing games or cutting corners.

2. "Anybody Can Come"

The excellent squadrons are the ones where the programs are solid. They've thought things through and they're prepared so that "anybody in the world can come in and look." This is opposite the squadron that is simply "keeping one step ahead of the law," i.e., figuring out which inspector is coming next and beefing up that program in preparation for an ORI or MEI. ⁵ The I.G. officers I interviewed stressed: practice the mission, don't practice the ORI. They had a lot more to say on the topic of preparation for inspections. "We see commanders doing things that are very short range in nature and are for the explicit purpose of passing the inspection. We like to think that we're sophisticated enough in the I.G. so that if an organization works and practices their wartime

⁴Turkey Shoot is usually a one day competition between the squadrons within the wing. Each squadron flies the same number and type of events.

⁵Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) evaluates the squadron's ability to execute it's wartime tasking.

contingency mission, we can design an inspection that goes in and tests that and it'll come out in the wash. They will shine because they've shown that they're prepared to do their job."

Coupled with realistic training is an active self-inspection program, with every member of the squadron involved. This means knowing what past discrepancies were, especially the major ones, and what's being done about them.

E. ATTENTION TO DETAILS

The excellent squadrons have a plan, the focus is long range. They look down the road to see where the stumbling blocks are and then come up with a plan to work around them. They pay close attention to details so that they can anticipate problems and do something about them.

1. Deployments - A Command Performance

Nowhere is attention to detail more evident to the senior officers than during the planning and execution of a deployment. The excellent squadrons think about the details from A to Z. They are willing to put in the extra effort and go the extra mile to see that deployments are done according to high standards and in style. The result is what one senior officer called "a command performance."

Furthermore, a wing Director of Operations added that the excellent squadron's deployment preparations will flow smoothly and on time without pressure from the wing commander; the strong squadron doesn't need this pressure.

2. Too Much Red On The Schedule?

A colonel at a numbered AF headquarters looks at the daily flying schedule as a quick gauge of whether a squadron has a plan and is paying attention to detail. "Look at the

schedule at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon," he advises, "if it's neat and everything's going according to plan, you can tell right away that the rythm of the schedule is pretty darn good. But if you see a lot of red marks and changes in aircrews, well something has gone wrong with the planning, something's gone wrong with the execution." In the excellent squadron, you won't see excessive schedule changes.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that a good-looking schedule board is not an objective in itself, it is the result of careful planning and anticipation of contingencies; an indication that the squadron is in control of the situation.

F. OPERATING OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

The comfort zone is the level of operation where the squadron is most comfortable. The natural tendency is to stay there; to do only those things they're good at and most comfortable with. But as the saying goes, there is no fruit close to the trunk, the apples are out on the branches, outside the comfort zone.

In the judgment of the senior officers, the excellent squadron is the one that operates outside the comfort zone, "near the margin."

1. A Good Squadron Getting Better

This means stretching every day, always looking for ways to improve. It is an attitude of "good isn't good enough, we want to get better." The excellent squadron, in the eyes of a senior officer at HQ TAC, condemns mediocrity, not in others but in themselves, regarding their approach to things. Although they have performed well in the past, the excellent squadron doesn't rest on laurels, they start each

day with a desire to excel, to do everything better than yesterday.

2. Take, Borrow, Or Steal Training

The excellent squadrons are aggressive in doing everything and anything to increase the number of quality missions they can fly. In the opinion of a wing commander "they will take, borrow, and if it came right down to it, they would steal" range time or opportunities to do Dissimilar Air Combat Training (DACT) with other squadrons. The same applies to participation in the various flying exercises, and opportunities to fly against the Aggressors ⁶ or Fighter Weapons Instructor (FWIC) ⁷ students. The excellent squadrons will be pushing the hardest for these types of difficult challenges.

⁶Aggressor pilots are skilled in Soviet tactics and knowledgeable of Russian doctrine. They fly MIG-style maneuvers in F-5E aircraft camouflaged in patterns typical of Warsaw Pact countries, and provide training against simulated enemy aircraft. Air Force Magazine, April 1985, p. 77.

⁷School for advanced training in tactics and employment of weapon systems.

G. WHAT ABOUT STATISTICS?

It is interesting that most of the senior officers didn't talk much about statistics, e.g., inspection results, maintenance aborts, etc., in their evaluation of excellence. Not that these statistics are not important in their minds, but most of the senior officers take it for granted that the excellent squadrons will score high on these quantitative measures. In other words, excellence in performing the mission is the key. When this is done, the good statistics will automatically follow. The seniors don't have to look, they know the good statistics are there.

More important than numbers is what a colonel termed "good performance in whatever." Consistency of performance over a period of time as well as in many different areas are characteristic of the excellent squadron.

IV. MUTUAL SUPPORT

Everyone understands working as a team in the air. The excellent squadrons don't wait until wheels are in the well to become a team, they start on the ground. They take time to sit and work with each other, looking at the books, learning the systems and tactics. They're dedicated to each other in a spirit of cooperation and teamwork.

"When I walk into a squadron where people are helping each other, this is an indication of an excellent squadron." Another senior officer, when visiting a squadron, observes the way people talk about themselves. The excellent squadrons, in his opinion, talk about themselves as a group--"we did this, we did that"

The attitude is, "we, as a squadron, are only as good as our weakest link" so everyone works to make the squadron better. It's this kind of attitude that allows a second lieutenant to critique his flight commander, a major, during a debrief. In the excellent squadrons, this lieutenant's critique is welcome.

So far, it may appear that the senior officers see no competition in the excellent squadrons? Not really, competition is there but it is a means of increasing mission capability; more important, it is directed at other squadrons rather than one-umpsmanship within the squadron. This is evidence of mutual support, another measure of the excellent squadron.

A. NEVER LOST A WINGMAN!

Perhaps the best example of teamwork I heard, is exemplified in an illustration given by a numbered AF

commander. This is the story of a WW II multiple ace, General J. C. Irons, who said that his greatest accomplishment, the thing he remembered most about flying was not the number of kills or the details of a specific victory, as one might expect. What he was most proud of was this: he had never lost a wingman.

This same attitude of cooperation and looking out for the other guy is the characteristic which identifies the excellent squadron to the senior officers.

B. SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

The excellent units build teamwork through an active social calendar based on pride in the squadron. There's planning and effort put into social get-togethers so that everyone has something to enjoy. According to the senior officers, the excellent squadrons also focus on the type of activities, such as dining-ins, dining-outs, and squadron reunions, which reinforce military traditions and squadron heritage, resulting in a greater sense of squadron identity, drawing the group closer.

C. THE MAINTENANCE SIDE OF EXCELLENCE

Up to this point, we've been focusing almost exclusively on the operations side of excellence, but there's another side--the maintenance side of excellence. Whenever you find an excellent squadron, the senior officers also expect to find an excellent Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU). The two go hand in hand, working as a team.

To illustrate, a wing commander describes the superb work of an AMU during a deployment. "Before I could get out of the airplane after taxiing in [maintenance] people stormed all around the aircraft That happened with all the airplanes. They didn't say, 'wait 'til you all get

here and we'll figure out what's wrong with the aircraft and then we'll get things fixed' They were in position and ready, they had a plan. It's this kind of effort that makes an excellent squadron. They had all the stuff laid out, everything marked. If we needed an engine, we could have had one in and out within the hour."

The excellent squadron understands the importance of the maintenance contribution. They expend the extra effort to cultivate good relations and a sense of teamwork and identity between the operations and maintenance people. The pilots, as well as the squadron commander are visible to the AMU people. The pilots in the excellent squadron will take the time to talk to the crew chief before and after a mission to explain what he's doing, giving the crew chief a sense of participation in what's happening in the air.

V. THE THUNDERBIRD SYNDROME--THEY LOOK SHARP

The majority of the officers interviewed felt that they could predict within a short time of arrival, whether they were standing in the midst of an excellent squadron. This is partly because of what a numbered AF commander called "The Thunderbird Syndrome." In other words, the excellent units look sharp!

After many years in the fighter business, this general and other senior officers have found that the excellent squadrons are the ones that also look good. "I don't think I've ever walked into a unit where it's been in disarray and found it to be excellent" was the comment of a TAC I.G member. A wing commander added that he's found a very strong correlation between how well the squadron does business and how well they look.

A. HOUSEKEEPING AND PERSONAL APPEARANCE

To most of the senior officers, good housekeeping and compliance with AFR 35-10 ⁸ are considered valid indicators of how seriously a unit takes its commitment to its responsibilities. It reflects a professional attitude and an interest in high standards. When the squadron looks sharp and has "that touch of class" it says this is someplace special, not just a place where people hang their caps.

It's also an indication of success. When people are successful, when they're good at what they do, they can't help but feel a very strong sense of pride. It's this pride

⁸AF Regulation 35-10 governs standards of personal grooming and proper uniform wear.

that the senior officers see being portrayed through good housekeeping. Clean, properly worn uniforms, scarves, nametags, tasteful decorations and displays, squadron logo plainly visible, etc., are some of the indicators of pride. A pride that goes beyond the individual; it's pride in the squadron.

B. SELF HELP

Investment of time in self-help projects, e.g., painting, installing paneling, etc., to enhance squadron facilities is evidence that "they think a lot of themselves, because people don't do that unless they're proud of themselves and what they're doing and are willing to give that extra effort; they'll do the same in the air." Self help is also seen as an indication of initiative, a quality highly valued by the senior officers.

C. "THAT LOOK IN THEIR EYES"

How does the excellent squadron respond to a visiting senior officer's presence? Is the squadron called to attention? Are people friendly?

A TAC I.G. colonel offered that the excellent squadrons have an openness and a willingness to display themselves; a quality he doesn't find in other places.

Likewise, a wing commander had this to add:". . . they're not standing around looking at their shoes, they hold their heads proud and they're willing to talk to you about any subject. They want to engage you, you can detect friendliness. Anywhere in the squadron whether at the operations desk, the life support area etc., people will walk up and ask, 'Can I help you sir? Can I show you around?'" This wing commander further emphasized that they're willing to talk to him spontaneously, without being prompted.

D. LOOKING GOOD VS. BEING GOOD

Is looking good always a sign of excellence? Can a shiny exterior be a cover for less than excellent performance? The answer from the senior officers is NO, as typified by a wing commander who said that he would be surprised if he walked into a shiny outfit that couldn't fly. Another general added, "I've seen some scruffy units that did well, but very few though. I've seen a lot more sharp units that did well." In other words, the correlation between looking good and being good is valid in the eyes of the senior officers. Looking good, in itself, is not remarkable. The cardinal point to be remembered is that the excellent squadrons, as seen by the senior officers, look good as a consequence of being good. After visiting an excellent squadron one is left with a certain gut level impression. It's hard to quantify, hard to measure, but the senior officers can feel it: it's a feeling that says, "Yes, this is the squadron I want to send to war!"

VI. SUMMARY OF PART I

Yes, all fighter squadrons in TAC are performing the basic mission. Yet, there are some squadrons which are performing their mission notably above others. The 51 senior officers interviewed recognize this and make use of certain criteria by which they differentiate the excellent squadrons. These criteria go beyond the quantitative statistics, and encompass a range of less easily quantifiable, but equally important issues. In brief, these criteria, distilled from the interview transcripts, are as follows:

A. THE EXCELLENCE CRITERIA

1. Squadron Leadership--Tough but caring leadership. Starting with the commander, who is supported by a cadre of strong intermediate leaders.
2. Mission - Professional Execution--Being able to execute the mission, but more important, being able to do it with a "touch of class."
3. Mutual Support--People in the squadrons supporting and helping each other, working as a team. This includes maintenance, whose contribution is not forgotten.
4. The Thunderbird Syndrome--They have "that look in their eyes," which says "we are the best." This attitude is reflected in the appearance of people and facilities.

B. ON TO THE EXCELLENT SQUADRONS

Based on nominations⁹ from the senior officers, I was able to select four excellent tactical fighter squadrons for visits. Each visit lasted about two days, during which time, I participated in as many squadron activities as I could, to learn as much as possible about the squadron and its operation. At length, I interviewed a cross section of the four squadrons, a total of 43 interviews. General observations and informal discussions, not recorded on tape, supplemented the recorded interview data.

In general, I found that the squadrons, although different from each other in many ways, e.g., aircraft, location, mission, and the specific strategies used to execute that mission, they did in fact share certain similarities, in their way of achieving excellence.

After visiting the excellent squadrons, as I reflected on how to present the data collected, I recalled the words of a wing commander in Part I, who said: "I guess you can say that excellence is made up of many different facets. Take a diamond or a crystal or some fine thing, you can turn it around and look at it from many different directions and it always looks beautiful!" In other words, the excellent squadron is like a diamond: brilliant any way you look at it.

With this association in mind, I have summarized, in Part II, the similarities I found among the four excellent squadrons visited. I call these similarities, THE FACETS OF EXCELLENCE.

⁹See Appendix A, Methodology, for complete details of the nomination process.

Part II

THE FACETS OF EXCELLENCE The Story Of Four Excellent Squadrons

VII. EXCELLENT COMMANDER EQUALS EXCELLENT SQUADRON

The commanders of the four squadrons visited are totally in love with being a squadron commander (CO), they see it as fulfillment of a dream, something they have wanted. "Ever since I was a second lieutenant I have wanted to be a fighter squadron commander . . . and now that I've got the job, it's about five times better than I ever dreamed." More significant is that they've not let promotions, or fear of senior officers erode or in any way compromise their love for their job and the people who work for them. It's more than a job, it's a great opportunity!

Not to say they are not interested in promotion, they certainly are, and they are looking forward to other challenges but for the present, the squadron its mission and its people is their overriding priority. There is nothing they would prefer to be doing. In talking to these men, I got the strong impression that from the first day of command, their attitude is: this is the greatest job, these are the greatest people to work with and this is the greatest place to be." This positive attitude drives everything. Two pilots, in their mid-twenties had this to say about their commander. "I think he's really enthusiastic about being a commander. You could tell that it was his lifelong ambition . . . you can tell that from the way he goes about doing things."

A. CO HAS A PLAN AND HE EXECUTES

The excellent commander has a goal for his squadron, a vision, a long-range focus, a direction for the squadron. One of the squadron commanders I visited has some advice he

got before taking over the squadron which he in turn passes on to his people: "before you take over any job, you ought to sit down and see what you want to do with the job, where you're going to go, what your game plan is." This helps him keep his mind on draining the swamp when the day-to-day alligators show up, i.e., being able to maintain focus on the important overall goals.

Vision also helps when they make mistakes. There may be a temptation to think that the excellent squadron commanders are supermen. On the contrary, they're as fallible as other humans. As one told me, "I wouldn't want you to know how many mistakes I make; I make a lot of them." The difference is that with a vision in mind, they learn from the mistakes and press on towards excellence.

It's one thing to have ideas but another to execute. Making it all happen takes hand work and tremendous followup. "The commander has told us the way he would like to see the squadron run. One of the things I've noticed," said this adjutant, "is that he has followed up on the things he says. The emphasis on followup is typical of the excellent commanders.

B. CO CARES

One of the unmistakable characteristics of the four squadrons commanders visited is that they cared. Evidence of caring was everywhere in my conversations with them. The most obvious evidence of this is the commanders' use of the words "my guys," "my people," "the guys" or "these kids" in reference to his squadron. One commander said, "they're like my children . . . , I think about them all the time." This does not mean coddling because every one of these commanders are quick to administer discipline where necessary, whether it's an Article 15 for an enlisted person

or being taken off the schedule for flying too low. The point is that they really do care about every one of their people. An Admin NCOIC ¹⁰ noted that her squadron commander doesn't care if "you're a one striper, a two striper, a major or whatever . . . he'll treat you like a person and do whatever he can to help; he cares." These commanders have invested time in getting to know their people. They've taken opportunities to get involved and make personal contact with each member.

1. 10-Hour Duty Day

Further evidence of caring on the part of the CO is evident in that each of the squadrons visited had gone to some type of daily flying schedule such that everyone could perform their duties and get home early. This was usually done through two go-day, i.e., flying twice vs. three times per day. In one particular squadron, the 10-hour duty day was almost an obsession with the commander. And working weekends, unless necessary to prepare for special event, such as a deployment, was almost unheard of!

2. Improving On The Past

The four commanders interviewed showed their caring and dedication to their people through constant efforts applied at improving the way the squadron is run as compared with what they experienced as squadron members. All four commanders, in different ways, talked about remembering lessons they learned in the past, things that worked well, and applying these lessons as squadron commanders. They also talked about making a conscious effort to avoid the kinds of things that, although successful in achieving the desired result, has also made squadron life unpleasant for

¹⁰ Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge.

them. "You can say 'well it was good for me, I made it this far, so it's good for them too'" That's not right in the thinking of these four commanders. Instead, they assert, "You've got to make it so that things which bothered you don't bother them."

C. LOYAL TO HIS PEOPLE

A squadron operations officer (ops officer) had this praise for his commander, "if one of his guys is right, regardless of who is doing the criticizing, he will stand up for his people. This means a lot to the young guys, he continued, "if they know that the boss is willing to fight for them when they're right, they'll give him their very very best." When asked what made his commander singular in this regard the ops officer replied, "it's a matter of degree. Everyone knows it's important to take care of their people, everyone wants to do that. But we all have our personal limitations."

In another squadron a scheduler (captain) had this to say, "when you see the support the commander gives the guys in the trenches, it instills in us a desire to strive for excellence--because now we want not only to work for ourselves, but by God, this guy cares about us and we want him to look good too. And the thing is, he's never asked us for that--[to make him look good] he cares about us more than he cares about his own promotion."

D. LEAD BY EXAMPLE

¹¹Red Flag--A very large combined exercise giving aircrews training against simulated enemy ground and air opposition. As many as 250 aircraft fly up to 4,200 sorties during each six-week exercise. Air Force Magazine, May 1984, p 122.

"If we're going to go to Red Flag '11 [or doing things here in the squadron], I like to be out front leading them and showing them what the years of experience and good fortune have taught me. If they never see me fly and they only see me doing administrative work, then that has an impact. [They might think]: 'Why would I follow this man into combat?' So I have got to be [right there] doing the work when they're pulling the chocks, getting ready to go off on trips, whatever it happens to be, getting my fingers dirty right along with them."

Another commander said he doesn't ask his 'kids' to do anything he won't do himself. Later when I interviewed the people in this squadron, this was confirmed. More than a few mentioned that, if their commander notices that the bathroom isn't properly cleaned, "he'll take a brush and brush it down himself," as he has done on more than one occasion in the past. This sets an example for the rest of the squadron. The act of cleaning the bathroom was not important in itself. What is significant is that the commander is willing to clean the bathroom. According to one of the individuals in the squadron, "People realized that he [the commander] is not the elite one and we the slaves--we're all elite." By the way, this particular squadron's facilities were absolutely immaculate.

Another commander feels that it is important for the people to have PME and advanced degrees so in addition to making every possible effort to allow PME and night school attendance, he's leading the way himself by enrolling in night classes.

E. COMMANDER IS HIGHLY RESPECTED

In listening to people in excellent squadrons talk about their boss, it was obvious that they respected him, for his

flying skills but also as both the leader of the squadron and, maybe most importantly, as a person.

1. Respected As Fighter Pilot

The commanders are highly esteemed for their excellence as fighter pilots, not only stick-and-rudder abilities but also air sense. In one of the squadrons the commander was considered by all to be the best pilot in the squadron! In all four excellent squadrons I visited the commanders were leaders that the pilots would readily follow in the air without question of their abilities. In the words of a captain, "we all have that confidence that our commander can do that [lead a 12-ship or any other type of deployment]. He can get out front and we'll follow him"

2. Respected As A Person

My opinion is that as professionals, the people in the four squadrons visited would follow orders from anyone who occupied the commander's office, but as we talked I sensed that in these four squadrons their motivation was in large part due to their respect for the CO as a person. The people seemed glad for opportunities to chat with their boss in the lounge.

In a late Friday afternoon interview with two pilots, when asked why they thought their squadron was considered excellent they immediately talked about their squadron CO being ". . . the kind of guy we would like to go to war with." They also said he was the kind of person such that they don't mind it "if he comes to you with a special project [extra work] when you're already loaded down." This was the same commander who was obsessed with the 10-hour day, to make sure that the day's flying is accomplished in a way such that no one spends more than 10 hours in the squadron.

Just as the commanders referred to their people as "my guys," etc., the squadron members referred to their commander as "our commander" with a sense of pride, ownership, and even admiration, that I did not expect to find in a military organization.

F. DIRECT/HONEST COMMUNICATION

The excellent squadron commanders are extremely concerned about making sure the word gets out to their people as soon as possible, making sure people didn't have to guess. I did encounter some instances in one of the squadrons where people felt that they were not as informed as they wanted to be but these were the exceptions rather than the rule.

1. Mass Communication

With timely communication as the goal, some type of mass communications systems is used--sometimes it's a mass brief in the morning or a weekly pilots meeting--to get the word out. One commander also holds weekly staff meetings patterned after wing standup¹² where the squadron's intermediate leaders can get together to share information including status reports on various squadron activities. In any case, the word gets out direct from commander and ops officer. Another commander, said that he likes to be able to "look everybody in eye and pass on information." This way, he is sure everyone is going in the same direction when the day begins.

Equally important, when the information comes down from the boss it is totally truthful. With pride, a senior captain with previous assignments in other squadrons related

¹²Wing Standup is a weekly meeting during which time the wing commander is informed of the status of operations of various functional and operational areas in the wing.

that "Anytime our squadron commander, has ever gotten up and told us something, I could take that to the bank and I know it's going to be the truth. And it just gives me a really good feeling because when he tells us something it always comes down that way. I have never seen him fall on his face . . . with a half truth."

2. Newsletters

Regular newsletters to the squadron is another effective source of information especially regarding upcoming events. In one squadron, I reviewed the file of Commander's Monthly Letters and found them to be extremely detailed and informative in discussing significant recent squadron events as well as what's forseen for the future. The tone of each letter was definitely positive and upbeat.

In another squadron, half of the newsletter, the "Wives Notes" is dedicated to keeping spouses ahead of what the squadron is doing, particularly in relation to deployments, letting them know in advance who will be deployed so that proper adjustments can be made. This commander also makes it a point to attend wives' coffees frequently. The purpose goes beyond socializing; he's making himself available to the spouses ". . . so they can ask the hard questions they don't want to to ask in front of their husbands or some other people--it's a no-holds barred session." His answers are direct and honest. "Sometimes they won't like the answer--but I will always give them the answer to their questions."

G. A WORD ABOUT STYLE

Does a squadron commander have to be a tough guy to be effective? On the other hand, must a commander have great charisma and personality to be effective? After reflecting

on the comments of these commanders and the personnel in the squadron I would say the answer is no to both questions.

Two of the commanders I interviewed seemed to have a bold, assertive presence, while the other two had a somewhat more casual, easy-going style. There was no evidence in any of the interviews or my observations of the squadrons that any of these four commanders were "screamers" or the authoritarian style leader. Yet, in each of these squadrons, as already noted, these men had the admiration and respect of their squadron, as well as an impressive list of squadron achievements, i.e., they were getting the job done. The secret may lie in what we have already discussed, namely a genuine caring for their people, what's commonly called a people oriented leadership style. This appears to be the common element characterizing the excellent commanders' style.

To be sure, results can be achieved by different methods, e.g., people oriented or lead-by-fear. In commenting on the difference in leadership style between their present commander and other commanders they've worked for, two pilots commented, "our job is to kill the enemy, but you don't have to kill your own people in the process." In the excellent sqs, not only are they achieving results but they also enjoy coming to work; it's fun. As another pilot said, "even though he's given it {the position of leadership} by the higher ups, he's also given the position of leadership by his subordinates. I think that's where we are right now. That's part of what makes this squadron great."

VIII. A WINNING ATTITUDE

The four excellent squadrons feel good about themselves, their squadron, and especially about their mission capability. "We're the best." If not spoken outright it is the attitude that permeates the excellent squadrons. They all think of themselves as winners. They have "the winning attitude."

A. WE ARE THE BEST

What is the winning attitude? It's an attitude of wanting to excel, to do things differently, to improve. It's an attitude of "whether we win or lose . . . we're never content to finish other than first." The excellent squadrons feel good about what they're doing and the fact that they're good at it; this provides motivation. The winning attitude is an expectation of excellence. "We don't accept averageness" was echoed many times in the four squadrons. This means striving for excellence all the time not just when an inspection comes up.

These squadrons are proud of the fact that they're the ones often called to fly against the aggressors or at the Fighter Weapons School. "We try as hard as we can to be the best we can possibly be. When we do a job we like to do it better than anyone else," is a common sentiment.

B. NO BOASTING ABOUT IT

Most persons in the excellent squadrons visited did not spend time boasting and bragging about how good they are. The message was definitely "we are the best" but it was expressed more through an air of quiet confidence, than loud

boasting. Certainly I met many who fit the John Wayne model of the fearless fighter pilot but the overall squadrons' attitude seemed to be that the record speaks for itself so they don't have to brag about it. "We just quietly come into town and kick tail."

C. THE WAY THEY TALK ABOUT THE SQUADRON

Asked what he would tell a friend coming into the squadron, a junior captain replied that first he would tell his friend that he was coming to a squadron where the commander talks with you, not at you, and values your opinion. He would also tell his friend that this is a squadron where people are excited about what they're doing.

This last judgement is similar to that expressed in another squadron where another capt said that he thinks his squadron is excellent partly because of the way people talk about the squadron. In his squadron they don't dwell on what they did three years ago, how great it was. Nor do they dwell on what they're going to do on the next assignment or how good it's going to be. They're excited, and spend their time talking about what they're doing today and are planning to do tomorrow.

D. WELCOME TO OUR SQUADRON

The winning attitude in many cases starts before the new member actually comes on board. Most of the new people I spoke to "got the word" during RTU ¹³ that certain squadrons including theirs had good flying and were good. At the same time that the RTU students were getting the word on the squadron, the squadron was also getting the word on the RTU

¹³Replacement Training Unit. Last stop in the training or retraining pipeline before a pilot joins a squadron. New pilots are assigned to the wing. Final assignments to the squadrons are made by the wing staff.

students. The excellent squadrons do a lot of scouting and recruiting. Nothing illegal, but through a network of contacts at RTU bases, they know about the performance of the incoming aircrew members. This should in no way imply that anyone is blacklisted. The idea is that on those occasions when there is a choice, if asked for input, the excellent squadrons like to be prepared to make an informed selection.

I also interviewed many who had worked hard to get their present assignment. In some ways it's a case of excellence attracting excellence.

E. WINNING ATTITUDE PROGRAMMED FROM DAY ONE

Once the new member comes on board in the excellent squadron he/she is made to feel that "you're the most important person this squadron ever had." Immediately, the new person is made aware of the standards of excellence. I spoke to several people with less than three months in their squadron. One said that his first impression was the attitude of "we're excellent, we're the best" seemed to be contagious throughout the squadron. Another said that one of the first things he noticed was that they always talk about being the best. They're concerned with being the best they can be at all times." This attitude, he said, was tradition in the squadron. From the first day in the excellent squadrons, excellence is ingrained so strongly into the new member, that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They're winners because they expect to be winners.

F. GETTING THE "ALPHA"

The commanders stressed the importance of everyone feeling like they're important and that what they're doing

is also important. Each of the squadrons I visited was one of at least three squadrons in the wing. In each case these squadrons had the alpha designation. ¹⁴ Each commander felt that it was important for the squadron to be "on the tip of the spear." In one squadron when the commander first arrived sometime earlier, the squadron was not alpha squadron. He immediately set this as one of his goal and within eight months the squadron got the alpha designation.

Being the Alpha squadron is only a part of being unique. Whether it's a special deployment, a special mission or special aircraft characteristic, the excellent squadrons focus attention on being different from anyone else in TAC. They develop niche that is theirs and theirs alone. They are contributing to national defense in some way.

This uniqueness supercedes the myth of location. Time and time again I heard that location, i.e., availability of range time and training airspace, helps but regardless of location, "we would be excellent anywhere! We may have to work harder, but we would still be excellent!" The attitude is that excellence is based on people in the squadron, not location or type aircraft flown.

They have something to rally around, something to be pumped up about. The commanders spend lots of time working deployments, exercises and other special taskings. In one squadron, the commander fought extra hard to take more people on an overseas deployment than TAC allowed, more people than he needed to fly the 12 airplanes. Why? Because chances like that do not come very often and this CO was determined to make sure as many people as possible get the occasion to participate in such a unique event.

¹⁴In case of contingency, the Alpha squadron will be first in the wing to respond.

One operations officer said that maintaining the winning feeling starts at the top with a positive atmosphere in the squadron and a positive outlook on the mission. The way they achieved this optimism was by making sure that people knew what they were going to do if they went to war. By being ready and being confident that they're able to execute the mission, it becomes easy for people to think and act like winners.

G. EXCELLENT BUT NOT PERFECT

The four squadrons visited are considered excellent, but they are not perfect. They do have areas that although satisfactory, are nevertheless weak by squadron standards. But, they recognize the shortfalls and, rather than accepting it as status quo, they are doing something about it. There's almost a built-in, automatic mechanism that keeps them striving for improvement. A first lieutenant told me about a certain functional area that, at the time of the interview, was weaker than it used to be. But he added that at the bar the talk centered around how to make this functional area what it should be. In his squadron people are always taking "positive actions" to make the squadron better.

In another squadron during a four-person group interview, they called it "pressure within ourselves to improve the squadron." This pressure to improve is part of the winning attitude.

IX. COMBAT CAPABILITY IS FIRST PRIORITY

When asked to define what he meant by aggressive flying training, a captain explained that his squadron was ahead of the others when it came to developing new tactics or trying new approaches to training that are more realistic. In all four squadrons there were things being done which were more, much more, than the basic TAC requirements. In some cases, they used programs which were not part of their Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) ¹⁵ evaluation. Some of these programs have been around for a while and are encouraged by TAC, however, they are difficult to execute. The question is: why do these squadrons fly the more aggressive programs? Because, according to one ops officer, "it makes them [the aircrews] come up the learning curve on handling complex missions." But more important, it's a matter of priority. In all four excellent squadrons, combat capability is the priority. "If we go to war . . ." was heard OVER and over again. Combat capability is what it's all about.

To counter what the operations officer called the "tendency to overkill" on the basic training, this squadron masters the basics but by carefully managing the flying program, they have been able to focus extra sorties on those missions which are beyond the basic TAC requirements, missions that make them more combat capable. They welcome any challenge, if it will make them better at what they do; anything it takes to move up the learning curve on handling complex missions.

¹⁵ORI--Evaluators Squadrons' Wartime Mission Capability.

A. EMPHASIS ON REALISM

While others were dropping six 25-pound simulated bombs, one of the squadrons visited was taking off at least twice per month with six 500-pound practice bombs under the wings. During a certain year this squadron delivered more than 70% of the heavyweight ordinance dropped in the wing. How did they get such a large share? They asked for it! The commander's explanation is simple: in combat the aircraft will be loaded with full scale ordinance. With 3,000 pounds of full scale ordinance, the aircraft will be heavier, accelerate slower and handle differently. He went beyond the basic TAC requirement because he wanted his pilots to train the way they would fly in combat. The more frequently they can do that, the better it is for them. There are payoffs for the bomb load crews also; they get practice with full-scale ordinance.

Another squadron is in the habit of incorporating Red Flag missions into their training program, rather than waiting for the one or two yearly Red Flag opportunities. They've found that they learn a lot at Red Flag, so why not fly these same missions at home.

One captain mentioned that his squadron strives to get demanding deployments but also ones that will be tactically beneficial for them. "My first year here, it seemed like every month there was something new I was doing. It was good experience and due to the efforts of the ops staff. That's one thing I have always enjoyed."

B. ATTENTION TO DETAIL

In addition to emphasizing realism in training, the excellent squadrons also emphasize attention to detail. It's one thing to get a bunch of airplanes together and go someplace, it's another when you pay such close attention to

detail and bring in all the other factors like in-flight reports, actual low-level routing expected during war, etc., which may be overlooked in peacetime training. In one squadrons, they actually go to the trouble of making up the tasking order they would expect to receive from higher headquarters--all the details are covered. This makes execution a little more difficult, but the extra effort is seen as worth it. Even some relatively non-critical details such as radio check-in are taken seriously. "We always taxi and check-in on time. We sound better than anyone else on the radio."

1. Mobility

The mobility program is another area where attention to detail is stressed. A senior captain who was a new member of one of the excellent squadrons was impressed with the difference between his present squadron and others he'd been assigned to. In this squadron, the mobility program is "10 times better" than the others he'd seen. "They've got their checklists down to the gnats rear," he said, "They know how every piece of equipment we want to take to war is going to get there. And every once in a while, they'll make a little change, find something else and make that a little better." This takes thought about efficient ways of doing business.

2. Ground Attack Tactics (GAT) Program

In another squadron I heard about a Ground Attack Tactics (GAT) Program. As explained, this program is designed to enhance the skills of four-ship flight leads who are either fully qualified or upgrading to mission commander status. On the day of a GAT mission, they are given the air tasking order early in the morning and are responsible for planning and coordinating the execution of that order

including actually launching the "gaggle" (as many as 12 ships) to the range and dropping ordinance. Each GAT is highly critiqued by the squadron's leadership. In the words of a flight commander, the first practice was "hilarious." Plenty of mistakes were made and they didn't get the necessary coordination. But in a controlled environment, they learned not to make the same mistakes again. But attention to detail, persistence and close coordination with maintenance paid off: ". . . the first time we rolled 12 airplanes out there, every one of them got off the ground" [and the mission was completed]. Now such missions are "commonplace."

In another excellent squadron, the golden rule is that if it's worth doing at all, it's worth doing correctly, in every aspect, right down to the nuts and bolts.

C. OPERATIONAL READINESS INSPECTION (ORI)--FEW SURPRISES

This realistic training with attention to the details is why the excellent squadrons do well on ORI's. When they come to any test of capability there are few surprises. ORI's are not necessarily any less difficult but the squadron has been there before, i.e., they've practiced their mission well. One commander compares an ORI to a test in school--if you know your subject and are ready for it, the pressure is not nearly as great.

D. CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION ENCOURAGED

The excellent squadrons are characterized by an environment which allows ideas to flow freely from the bottom up, blending the expert book knowledge and creativity of the new guys with the experience of the old heads. One commander says he encourages any suggestion because if 100 ideas are brought up and as few as two of them are embraced,

it means two ideas the squadron may not have had otherwise. The idea of practicing with heavy weight full-scale ordinance is an example of one such idea generated by "a couple of captains," and endorsed by the commander.

Another example of innovation is the "Experts Program." This is a program in which "everything we could think of" is subdivided into individual subject areas, for example, "Russian aircraft," "the Soviet pilot", "Electronic Counter Measures (ECM)." Participants sign up for a topic to research. This individual then becomes an expert in that area. Later, during pilots' meetings, someone presents his specialty.

E. FOCUS ON MISSION

In the excellent squadrons everyone from top to bottom knows exactly what the mission is and can make a direct correlation between what they are doing on a day-to-day basis and the overall goal of the squadron. Everyone feels a part of the mission. I often asked what is the mission of the squadron, and in all cases the people I asked including the enlisted troops repeated what the commander had earlier told me, often using his exact words. This shows that the commander has spent time reminding them of the mission and showing how the pieces fit together.

An outstanding example of this focus on the mission can be seen in the attitude of a squadron adjutant. While noting that he and his people have nothing to do directly with flying or repairing aircraft, he sees their job as important to the squadron mission. He notes that if, for example, OER's and APR's, aren't processed properly, the resulting dissatisfaction could hinder the mission. He doesn't see his administrative people as "non-flight line types." Instead, he says that "in essence, we make it

happen, we're out there too." To help instill this philosophy in his people, he ordered and posted desk stickers for his troops emblazoned with a big A and the slogan: "Administration Office Workers With Flight-Line Attitudes." ¹⁶

F. NOT EVERYTHING BUT SOME THINGS WELL

With the initiative and all the programs the excellent squadrons have going, this does not mean that they're using every tactic and flying every formation. All the programs discussed have one aim--executing the combat tasking better. Programs that don't fit this criteria are not implemented. According to the philosophy of one ops officer, the formula is simple "if it's something we think we have to do to get ready to kill the bad guys, then we do it. But if it's not, then we don't do it. We try to limit the number of things in our bag of tricks to a manageable number." The bottom line is readiness. Training is tailored to the threat they expect to face--they focus on that and manage the training accordingly. This is a common philosophy in TAC. The challenge is to put it into practice. The four squadrons visited have been able to do that.

G. SAFETY ATTITUDE

Fly safe is not just a buzz word in the four excellent squadrons visited, it's a way of life. It's the focus of everything they do. This safety attitude is ingrained into everyone in the squadron, especially the new people. Emphasis on safety drives the honest communication we talked about earlier. During discussions of flight activities,

¹⁶This is part of an overhaul of the administrative field initiated in November 1983. Although the adjutant didn't originate the slogan, it definitely expresses his attitude about administrators being part of the mission.

whether it's a briefing, a debrief, or a pilots meeting, everyone has a say regardless of rank. As a flight commander put it, "when we close a door to debrief a mission, there is no rank involved. You still show the same military courtesies, but we're talking life or death . . .; the wingman has to be responsible enough to say, 'I don't think that was a sound tactic, we would have died today . . ., we didn't plan that mission as well as we could have.'"

1. Off The Schedule, No Questions Asked

While I was visiting the excellent squadrons, I saw a most vivid example of the safety attitude. I was at the operations desk talking with the commander and ops officer when a First Lieutenant asked to be off the schedule. He had no specific ailment and had not gone to the flight surgeon but was "not feeling 100%" because he'd stayed up late with the baby that night. Their response was something to the effect of, "fine, take care of yourself and let us know how you feel tomorrow." That was the end of this exchange, which lasted less than two minutes. No further questions were asked. The ops officer made the schedule change. As it happened the sortie was lost because no one else was available.

Later I spoke to this lieutenant who said that he had absolutely no qualms about taking himself off the schedule. He said that taking care of a baby is no good reason to put an airplane in the ground. He also added that you can feel the safety attitude all over his squadron. "In this squadron it's an accepted fact, not just lip service. When they say 'when you don't feel good take yourself off the schedule and nothing will be said', they mean it. There is no stigma attached." I also spoke to the ops officer involved. He indicated that the squadron is not "padlocked" into a certain number of flights per day. "If we don't have

anyone else to fill in, then we'll take an operations deviation for that flight. The commander fully supports this policy." The philosophy is that if you have to take too many actions to salvage a solution, then it's getting too complex and probably too dangerous--"it ain't worth it."

At another squadron I again observed someone taking himself off schedule; the results were the same. In all four squadrons, the leadership talked about trusting the judgment of the flight crews and letting them make that decision.

2. Safe versus Oversafe

And yet, with the emphasis on safety, the excellent squadrons are not safe to the point of conservatism, or safe just for the sake of maintaining a good safety record. All have aggressive flying training programs. The attitude is: we do things aggressively but in a safe manner; we don't take unnecessary chances!

X. TEAMWORK AND CARING--THE WE-ATTITUDE

The fact that we accomplish the mission and get the operations done every month is not unlike what every other fighter squadron does. They meet their monthly contracts--they fly and they qualify by dropping bombs or whatever. I think that one of the reasons we are excellent, and probably the biggest one, is that 100% of the people up and down the line--from the youngest airman's wife . . . to the lieutenant colonel himself--every person in the squadron cares. And not just care about themselves, but care about everybody else in the squadron.

This is the assessment of one of the commanders interviewed regarding the difference between his squadron and others; an assessment shared by many in all four excellent squadrons. This assessment points out another facet of excellence in tactical fighter squadrons: they have a we attitude: they work together and care about each other.

A. TEAMWORK

Teamwork in the excellent squadrons means group effort, not just one or two people doing all the work but everyone giving 100%. It means avoiding any Gold-team Brown-team or we-they attitudes. One commander in particular, is quick to "cut off at the knees," anything that will drive a wedge between members in the squadron.

Teamwork starts with the commander and the ops officer who are one and the same in terms of a shared philosophy on how the squadron should be run. Not only do they share the same basic philosophy but, as noted in earlier, they don't get in each other's way. The same thing applies to other critical relationships, especially the squadron's relation to their Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU).

1. Maintenance - A Critical Relationship

After spending time preparing and planning a mission, the aircrews interviewed are confident they will be able to fly that mission and get the training. They don't worry too much about the frustration of ground aborts due to maintenance problems. They know that their airplanes will not only look good on the inside but the aircraft systems will be up.

In all four squadrons, I heard high praise for the job maintenance is doing, and sensed the realization, within the squadron, of the important role maintenance plays in their success.

They take time to make sure the AMU crews know of their appreciation. "We have maintenance parties every couple of months. We let them know how good they've done. We thank them for what they've done." Another pilot mentioned that in his squadron the maintenance crew chiefs and specialists are encouraged to come over on a regular basis and sit in on debriefings, to see what actually happened in the air that day. While the crew chiefs are learning about the operations side, the pilots especially the commander, are likewise learning about the maintenance function. As one commander put it, "I get involved in learning as much about maintenance as I can because I'm not going to have a whole bunch of time [to learn what I need to know] if we go to combat tomorrow."

The emphasis is on cultivating a relationship such that maintenance and operations are welded into one team, not 'the flying unit,' and 'the maintenance unit.' A captain described it as a situation where maintenance and operations are funnelling their efforts mutually toward a common goal as opposed to independently toward the goal. He adds that, in his squadron, the rapport between maintenance

and operations is very close--a rapport he's never seen before in other places.

2. Enlisted Support Is Also Critical

Just as maintenance support is critical, enlisted support is also an essential part of the squadron's achieving excellence. This service is not taken for granted. The adjutants, the ops officers and commanders I interviewed had high praise and spoke with enthusiasm and energy about the work of the enlisted members of the squadron. Besides talking about it, the excellent squadrons demonstrate their appreciation of the enlisted talent by treating their enlisted counterparts as part of the team. An enlisted (E-4) intelligence briefer certainly agrees with this. He considers his present squadron to be much easier to work in than the two other squadrons he's been assigned to because "the commander has an open attitude toward everyone including enlisted . . . and the pilots don't talk down to the enlisted person." This is important in his job as an intelligence briefer. He explained that he finds it difficult to be motivated and stand in front of the squadron each day, if the officers don't respect the person wearing stripes. He has no such difficulty in his present squadron.

B. TEAMWORK VS. COMPETITION

Although there are some who can be described as clearly self oriented, overall, the excellent squadrons are characterized by competition directed against the standard, i.e., combat readiness or other squadrons, rather than internally, against each other. Thus, it serves to make them better.

C. CARING

As the quote at the beginning of this Chapter illustrates, the excellent squadrons are characterized by people who care about each other. The attitude is "if you ain't proficient, you better get proficient." However, there is an important add-on to this attitude, namely that there will be someone more proficient who is willing to help if needed. Nowhere was this more beautifully illustrated than in one of the squadrons I visited, a two-seater unit.

One of the pilots was considered (by his squadron commander and others), to be so good that, "he could have won Top Gun any time he wanted" was instead more than willing to fly the back seat instructor position to help the more inexperienced comrade improve. By flying the backseat position on so many rides, he automatically disqualified himself from Top Gun competition by not getting the required number of front seat sorties. According to his commander "this guy was a real winner because he was more interested in making things happen for the unit than he was in getting a personal placque to hang on the wall."

In many other ways the excellent squadrons gave examples of "taking care of our own." This caring is also expressed in a more formal sense.

1. Socializing As A Team

Lively get-togethers in the four squadrons visited don't just happen. Whether it's a picnic, athletic event, or a squadron sponsored five kilometer run up and down the runway, someone has taken time to put some thought and planning into making the event a success. But more important than the time together for partying, the excellent squadrons put in a lot of time on and off duty talking about flying and hashing out new ideas. The senior squadron

leadership can be counted on to be present, acting as sounding boards for new ideas. This informal setting also provides an ideal time for discussion of personal problems not easily broached in a more formal setting.

The idea behind socializing is to get to know each other. This objective has been achieved as evidenced by the frequency of comments similar to "we're real close, we know each other like brothers." It also says, "we care."

2. SOS, APR's And OER's

Concerning SOS, ¹⁷ the commanders I visited did not necessarily agree with the emphasis placed on SOS by promotion boards. But recognizing that promotion boards promote "the whole person, not the leading tactical fighter pilot," the bottom line was always the same: they got to have PME, those who want it will go. One commander candidly noted that he's parochial about it, i.e., he doesn't want them to go. But he adds, "I have to think of their career progression and if I were to deny them that opportunity, I'd be putting their foot in the barrel and it's not fair." Another commander fully supports anyone who wants to go to SOS in-residence. Moreover, if not completed in residence, it must be completed by correspondence. In either case SOS is mandatory in that squadron.

A similar philosophy applies to Air Command and Staff College Seminars and completion of masters programs. If you want it, you will get it.

The excellent commanders also have strong opinions about OER's and APR's, and making sure that those who have given so much to the squadron are properly rewarded with the best possible OER or APR. One commander who spends a lot of

¹⁷Squadron Officer School (SOS)--Part of officer Professional Military Education. Airman Performance Report (APR). Officer Evaluation Report (OER).

time on performance reports, sees monitoring of the quality of APR/OER as one of his primary responsibilities. "I sit down and look to see if that flight commander, who may not have written many OER's or APR's, has done well for his guys. . . . it is one of my most important jobs."

XI. LEADERSHIP EVERYWHERE

We've already talked extensively about leadership at the squadron commander's level. In the excellent squadrons, leadership is present at all levels, but particularly noticeable at the flight commander level--the backbone of the squadron. Almost all of the people I interviewed in the four excellent squadrons, from squadron commander on down, spoke about their intermediate leaders (flight commanders) as a key ingredient in the excellence in their squadron. But, as I listened to their comments, it became clear that the presence of strong flight commanders was not an accident. It is the result of the philosophy in the excellent squadrons which is oriented toward combat readiness, well summarized by a squadron ops officer who said that one of the big lessons he's learned and brought to his job is that flight commanders and flight leads must be able to lead in combat. Thus he gives them every opportunity to be leaders and decisionmakers in the squadron.

A. FLIGHT COMMANDER DECISIONMAKING

Being a flight commander in the excellent squadrons means just that, commander. It's an indication of authority; it means being in charge; it means making decisions. Certainly the squadron commander and ops officer can make all the decisions but "that doesn't teach the young guys how to prepare themselves to assume positions of leadership in the future," if they don't learn to make decisions as often as possible along the way. Whether it's a discipline problem or a decision involving the flying

schedule, the decisions are delegated to the flight commander. The squadron commander may not agree and some decisions may have to be changed. The important point is that the initial decision will be made by the flight commander.

With visible pride a squadron commander described an incident sometime earlier, in which a flight commander, after reviewing the film from a mission, grounded one of his people for two weeks, on the spot, for flying too low. (The commander added that it was not a flagrant violation). What impressed the commander was not that the individual was grounded, but that the flight commander had the guts to exercise his leadership in making the decision without hesitation. He had made his decision and was informing the commander, rather than coming in to ask for direction.

This philosophy of decisionmaking is also impressed on the flight crews. They're also given every opportunity to make decisions. "You're in charge, you're responsible and if you come home early or come home without doing anything at all, if that's a good decision then that's a good decision." The idea is to push decisionmaking to the lowest level possible. To let them use their own intelligence.

In certain instances, not involving safety issues, the commander will allow the decisionmaker to learn by making a mistake. Then, "I'll tell them what I might have done in that case. If it's something we need to change, we will, if it's not, then the decision will ride. The next time they'll make a little better decision."

1. Eye-Watering Flexibility

A flight commander said that the flexibility given the junior leaders, himself included, was "eye-watering." As long as it was within bounds and good for the squadron, they were allowed to go their own way. As a flight

commander he is motivated by the fact that he is now allowed to do some of the things he's been "dreaming about doing for the last 10 years." This keeps him "humpin." The bottom line is flexibility to be a leader, his judgment is trusted.

The same thing applies to the weapons shop where people are allowed to "breathe and develop tactics, as long as they're within bounds."

This is another way of expressing the age-old concept of delegation. Many talk about it, the excellent squadrons practice it. Each person has a job and is allowed to do it with little interference. One commander summed up his philosophy this way: "he [the commander] has to look the people in the eye and assign the right people to the key jobs. He has to make sure they understand what their tasks are--and then he has to cut them loose and let them go do it."

2. Making The Schedule

A squadron scheduler, a captain, explained why he felt that the junior leadership in his squadron was strong: they are allowed to do their job without "micro supervision." To illustrate his point, the scheduler compared himself to a friend who is also the scheduler in another squadron. He noted that at the other squadron, after the schedule has been made up, the ops officer will examine it line by line and make so many changes that the the executive officer, "may as well have made it up himself." In contrast, when his ops officer looks at the finished product, it takes "a few minutes" for approval. ¹⁸

¹⁸The difference here may be that in the excellent squadron, the executive officer and scheduler are both clear about the training priorities and have a good on-going communication between them.

In another squadron, where the schedule is approved by the flight commanders, the executive officer and commander are in the habit of walking by the schedule board at 5 o'clock in the afternoon looking at the overall schedule. They may ask some questions or make changes but rarely do they get involved in the details of building the schedule.

B. COMMANDER/OPERATIONS OFFICER RELATIONSHIP

Separation of duties between the commander and ops officer is one of the reasons why the squadron works so well. In each of the squadrons visited, the commander had the highest genuine praise for the ability of the executive officer to run the squadron. One of the keys to success was separation of duties, i.e., the commander setting the overall policy and looking at the big picture, while the executive officer runs the squadron.

As a flight commander put it, "things are a lot smoother for everybody in his squadron because the commander and ops officer don't get in each others way. Each knows his job and leaves the other alone." This flight commander, a major, also added that he doesn't see that in other squadrons he's been associated with.

The physical location of their offices was conducive to this. The commander was either upstairs or down the hall from the operations desk while the executive officer was always a few paces from the ops desk and in earshot of what was going on. In three of the four squadrons I visited, the executive officer was in line of sight of the ops desk. This was no accident, it was by conscious choice, although somewhat constrained by physical layout of the building.

More important than physical layout is the fact that the squadron commanders keep separation of duties in the

forefront of their thoughts, to be sure they really are not interfering, by "unconsciously" handling ops-type issues (unless the ops officer is unavailable or it is an emergency).

C. PROFICIENCY ADVANCEMENT

Advancement in the excellent squadrons is based on proficiency and ability, not longevity or rank. These squadrons are proud of the fact that, like the commander, everyone in a leadership position is tactically competent, i.e., skilled in the aircraft, and credible in the eyes of the squadron. They have demonstrated their ability to lead in combat not just fly a good aircraft. They have also demonstrated the ability to follow well and a desire to learn.

Since advancement in the excellent squadrons is the reward for demonstrated performance not rank, it sometimes happens that a lieutenant is put in flight lead status ahead of a captain or a captain may be selected over a major for flight commander. Although some may find it hard to accept, the message is ". . . not saying that this guy is below average, it's just saying that this other guy is above average." Of course this does not negate the importance of experience as a factor in advancement. Experience is important. The point is that people who have the ability are not held back simply because they may lack the hours of another, who is less capable.

D. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT - IN HOUSE

The presence of strong intermediate leadership in the excellent squadrons is not accidental. It is the result of an environment where creativity is encouraged, mistakes allowed as in decisionmaking. The excellent squadrons also

have several in-squadron programs to develop leadership. Said one commander, "Our job is to make sure that when they're up there, we give them every opportunity to be prepared to be there."

Earlier, in discussing the focus on combat capability, we talked about the mission commander's program. This is a method of developing leadership through planning and executing a difficult mission. It is also part of the philosophy of developing leaders by delegating responsibility. During my visit to another squadron, they were getting ready to start another Flight Lead School, their third in the past 18 months. As the commander explained, flight lead school is a one to two day school which is held "whenever we're getting ready to upgrade a bunch of new flight leads." Besides academics, the soon to be flight leads are advised on how to brief, how to debrief, and some of the little things to watch out for on flights. Then there's a seminar portion where some old flight leads including the squadron commander talk about what it's like being a flight lead. Even some of the newest flight leads are brought in to share their perspective on the difference between a wingman and a flight lead. Future plans call for the wing commander and director of operations to be included in the seminar. The squadron commander feels that it's important for the new flight leads to benefit from these senior officers' experience and find out face to face, what they expect from a flight lead.

XII. HERITAGE AND HIGH STANDARDS

Walking into each of the four squadrons visited, one cannot escape notice of the sense of history which permeates the entire squadron. Whether it's the squadron insignia, plaques, or paintings of vintage aircraft on the walls, or war memorabilia in the lounge, the squadron's heritage is evident. This introduces the next facet of excellence common to all four squadrons: they stay in touch with their squadron heritage. From this stems the high standards, also common to these squadrons.

A. HERITAGE

To say that a unit has plaques on the wall or war memorabilia in the lounge is not unusual. What is unusual is that in the excellent squadrons, these items are more than interesting museum pieces. They are symbols of past excellence and more important, they are the impetus toward continued excellence. In previous chapters, we talked about the winning attitude--that feeling of uniqueness; we also talked about an internal "pressure" to be the best in everything, a contagious desire to excel, felt by everyone in the squadron. This is the influence of heritage. Some interview comments from a first lieutenant, a flight commander (major) and a captain, each in different squadrons will explain further.

"The 999th ¹⁹ has always been an excellent squadron and we've just carried on the tradition . . . people have to live up to their heritage."

¹⁹Not real squadron designation.

"This is the only time I've been associated with the heavy tradition and heritage. But you can get more effort out of people in this squadron than I think you can in a lot of other squadrons. Just because they wear that patch--they try just a little bit harder."

"You walk in the door and all of a sudden, you're part of that history and heritage. You keep in mind that you need to excel just as all the people who have come through the squadron before. You feel like you have to maintain that level of excellence."

The research indicates that the squadron commanders are consciously aware of the influence of heritage. Thus, emphasizing heritage is an important part of their overall strategy. One of them stresses that it's important for everyone to understand where they came from and "how this thing all got started." During his first meeting with new people in the squadron, and anytime the opportunity arises, another commander tries to impress upon them their heritage--that there're many who have worked hard and done well for them, now it's their responsibility to carry on.

An outstanding example of this was illustrated during a mobility exercise in one of the squadrons I visited. About midnight, after all the equipment was packed on pallets, ready to go, the commander discovered that most of the bins on the pallets were empty--simulated packing. After canceling the next day's flying and initiating a 2 o'clock squadron recall, the entire squadron stayed up until 6:00 AM repacking the bins. "When we practice packing, by God! we're going to pack as if we're really going someplace." His message to them was simple: "This is an excellent squadron with high standards. In this instance you didn't live up to those standards. You're winners but you didn't act like winners this time."

This commander confided to me that he was apprehensive about the potential negative reaction to such drastic action, especially since he had been in command for just a short time. His fears were unfounded! He had made a direct appeal to heritage and the response was positive. In fact

many apologized for not living up to their usually high standards!

On a less dramatic basis, squadron traditions and memory of heroes and living legends. serve to reenforce heritage, and the excellence that goes along with it.

1. Traditions

Traditions may be as simple as people getting together for a certain specific meal at a certain restaurant. This may occur several times per year or only after important events such as deployments. Or, of course, traditions may be as elaborate as a mess dressed dining-in. Regardless of how it's done, these squadron traditions, in addition to linking the squadron with its past, also serve to build and reinforce cohesiveness, identity and comraderie.

Within the previous six months of my visit, three of the four squadrons had each held a dining-in. The impact of this event was tremendous. Everyone described the event as unforgettable and motivational. It literally brought tears to the eyes of many who participated.

In the fourth squadron, they did have another event which was just as impactful as a dining-in. With a surprising amount of emotion, people in this squadron described a certain going-away party. But this was no ordinary party. It was farewell to J. M. ²⁰ On this special occasion, his aircraft callsign was retired, never to be used again. J. M. is a living legend in that squadron.

²⁰In keeping with the policy of not identifying squadrons or people, I have provided initials only.

2. Heroes And Living Legends

In addition to plaques on the wall and holding traditional squadron functions, the excellent squadrons also emphasize heritage and excellence through the memories of, Heroes and Living Legends; those who have set examples of excellence through their exploits in the air as well as on the ground. Interviews were well laced with comments such as "I remember X used to say . . ." or "when so and so was here . . ." The spirit, the essence of these men, is alive.

Heroes are those now retired, maybe deceased, members of the squadron who became aces in past wars or were in some way significant in the squadron's history. In some cases, a hero may also be a former squadron or wing commander remembered from a time when the interviewee was not a member of his present squadron.

Living legends are similar except that they are currently in the squadron or recently departed, within the past few years. Living legends are not just good sticks in the aircraft, they're the best! They are also experts on the technical details of the weapon systems. But more important, they are unit oriented, willing to forego personal glory by sharing their expertise with the squadron. These are the guys who put in time assisting others with academics. They also fly the instructor position more than usual, to help others increase their proficiency. Living legends are the innovators in the squadron, not the source of all the ideas, but the ones who stimulate ideas in others by getting groups together to discuss relevant issues. Some may be flight commanders, but regardless of whether they hold a formal title, they are the accepted informal leaders of the squadron. They are not necessarily the superstars in terms of one-time events; perhaps the most distinguishing

feature of a living legend is consistently excellent performance on a daily basis.

In either case, heroes and living legends are the ones who leave an indellible impression in the minds of those who follow. Their example is emulated by others and adds to the richness of the squadron's heritage of excellence, a powerful motivator toward maintaining high standards.

B. HIGH STANDARDS

Indirectly, the excellent squadrons have already told us a great deal about their standards. The flight commander who grounded one of his people for accidentally flying too low is telling us about his squadron's standards. The operations officer who told us about his squadron's insistance on flying missions more difficult than necessary to meet the basic TAC requirements, is saying something about that squadron's standards. The proficiency (versus longevity) advancement system for selecting flight commanders and flight leads, also tells us something about standards in the excellent squadrons. Let me summarize by saying that the standards in the excellent squadrons are high, consitently so.

But more important than the fact that the standards are high, is the question of how such high standards are achieved and maintained. Individual professionalism is the starting point. Beyond that, the commander, pride in the squadron and peer pressure play important roles.

1. The Commander

As we've seen before, the four commanders visited lead by example. This is also true in regard to squadron standards. The commander sets the standard through his own

behavior. One commander noted that since he expects every pre-flight briefing to be done professionally, he has to do the same. In leading a four-ship formation, he cannot excuse lack of total preparation because his time and energy are diverted by too many meetings the day before. "If it means coming in at 4 o'clock in the morning to prepare a briefing, then I'm going to do that."

He is also willing to make the tough disciplinary decisions when necessary, to enforce squadron standards, even if it means taking someone off the schedule during Red Flag deployment, administering an Article 15 (disciplinary action) or actually removing a pilot from the squadron for flying deficiency. Indeed, I did hear about actions such as these over the last two years.

The excellent commanders allow, even encourage their intermediate leaders to face the tough decisions and set the standards. A senior captain related that he's been in squadrons where standards (in this case, safety standards) were not as highly emphasized. He continues, "it's there for everybody, if they want it, it's a pick and choose thing. People will tolerate mistakes or conscious acts with no [followup remedid action]. A guy will go out and he'll fly lower than the briefed attitude, he'll get steeper than planned on a dive attack but will go ahead and press in. He'll recover okay but is never counseled about it." Not so in his present squadron.

2. Squadron Pride

Another reason why the four squadrons I visited are able to maintain such high standards can be found in pride. But this is pride in the squadron more than pride in themselves individually (of course they have individual self pride, but squadron pride is overriding). This again can be traced back to heritage, i.e., "this squadron has a heritage of excellence, I'm proud to be a part of it."

How much pride do they have in their squadron? Here's an example from an F-15 pilot: "in talking to other pilots I see a lot of people at bars [during exercises] take off their squadron patch and put on the McDonnell-Douglass 'Eagle-Driver' patch. . . . I'm proud to have those at home but I've never worn one since I've been in the 999th. I'm more proud of the fact that I fly in the 999th." Others are equally proud of their squadrons.

3. Peer Pressure

This intense pride in the squadron means an intense desire to make it the best it can be. Each member of the squadron does his/her share but is also willing to use peer pressure, not a lot of pressure but enough gentle pushing and kidding to correct substandard performance. In the excellent squadrons, the rule is, "if you ain't proficient, you'd better get proficient."

This pride and the accompanying peer pressure is why weak areas are not allowed to stay that way long. It explains why when the going gets tough people are still willing to put out. As a flight commander explained, people in the squadron still have the same first reaction to certain tasks--"boy, I'd really prefer not to be doing this . . ." but because of pride, the second reaction is, "but if we've got to do it, then we'll do it absolutely the best we can." This is squadron pride.

XIII. SUMMARY

I expect the reader will agree that there is no magic or complicated formula in the way the excellent squadrons go about achieving results or performing against the measures used by the senior officers in evaluating those results. In terms of the basic raw material--the people, the aircraft, and facilities, the excellent squadrons are not significantly different from other squadrons. The difference is in how those resources are utilized.

In summary, the criteria of excellence used by the senior officers in judging excellence are:

SQUADRON LEADERSHIP--tough but caring leadership. Starting with the commander who is supported by a cadre of strong intermediate leaders.

MISSION - PROFESSIONAL EXECUTION--being able to execute the mission but more important, being able to do it with a touch of class.

MUTUAL SUPPORT--people in the squadrons supporting and helping each other, working as a team. Maintenance contribution not forgotten.

THUNDERBIRD SYNDROME--they have "that look in their eyes" that says "we are the best." This attitude reflected in appearance of people and facilities.

In the squadrons, the facets of excellence were strikingly similar to those described by the senior officers. The words used are slightly different but the basic ideas are the same:

EXCELLENT COMMANDER EQUALS EXCELLENT SQUADRON--the commander is the key. He is a leader in the air and on the ground.

A WINNING ATTITUDE--they talk like winners, they act like winners and indeed, they become winners. It's contagious throughout the squadron.

COMBAT CAPABILITY IS FIRST PRIORITY--the training is aggressive and realistic. They are creative in trying new things, always with safety in mind. Combat readiness is the why behind everything.

TEAMWORK AND CARING--group effort is the way of business whether it's socializing or training.

Maintenance and operations work together toward common goal.

LEADERSHIP EVERYWHERE--strong leaders permeate all levels of the squadron. Qualified individuals are delegated the authority and the flexibility to make decisions.

HERITAGE AND HIGH STANDARDS--excellence is a matter of tradition. Others have left a heritage of excellence, which is emphasized and continued.

This was an exciting and informative experience. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from this study can be stated as follows: challenge the people with high standards of performance, instill a sense of pride, show them what you want and then step back and allow them the flexibility to be creative in achieving those goals. But most important, show them that you care.

This research has value for all in the tactical fighter community. It identifies excellence in a positive light rather than focusing on what needs "fixing." Second, it offers a glimpse of what TAC seeks in all its fighter squadrons and provides guidance to all in their quest for excellence. Like the excellent companies in In Search of Excellence, Lessons From America's Best Run Companies, TAC can learn much from its "best" tactical fighter squadrons.

Part III

RECOMMENDATIONS

Actions Toward Excellence In TAC

XIV. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. TO TACTICAL AIR COMMAND

1. Reflect Excellence Criteria In Squadron Commander's Evaluation

Excellence is not a short term proposition. Establishing and maintaining excellence necessitates a willingness to forego immediate short term results, while maintaining a long term focus. Commanders who embark on this road to excellence must be supported by "the system." Achieving excellence requires willingness to delegate, to allow mistakes, to make the tough decisions in relation to subordinates and superiors as well, while flying an aggressive training program. In essence, excellence means RISK for the squadron commander.

Unfortunately, taking risks, operating beyond the normal comfort zone, and initiating programs which have a long term payoff, possibly beyond the commander's tour of duty, is not often the focus of the OER system, which tends to reward short term accomplishments achieved while the individual is in command.

For these reasons, the excellence criteria summarized in Part I of this research, should become a more significant, if not most significant, aspect of the basis for selecting, evaluating, and promoting fighter squadron commanders. Intangibles such as the squadron's morale, the commander's courage and his long term impact on the squadron should be incorporated into a commander's overall evaluation. During my interviews for Part I, many of the senior officers, described several examples of squadrons which were far from excellent because the commander was

driven by a perceived need for short term results, for evaluation purposes.

Incorporation of the excellence criteria into the selection and evaluation process should help alleviate this situation.

2. Emphasize Flying Activities More In Promotion Decisions

As I interviewed squadron members, I sensed a deep trace of dissatisfaction with the current emphasis on PME (Professional Military Education), SOS (Squadron Officer School) in particular, advanced degrees, and other non-flying activities, in the promotion system. This discontentment was not with the fact that these requirements exist; the concern of these fighter pilots is that they are not given enough credit for outstanding performance of their primary duty and that the timing of these requirements is wrong.

In the minds of many I interviewed, ancillary duties are "overemphasized" during promotion cycles. In the view of many, being the best fighter pilot in the nation means nothing, unless the SOS ticket and others, are punched. Many feel that these non-flying requirements come at a time in an aircrewmember's career when he is developing proficiency in the air and increasing his weapon system knowledge on the ground, leaving little time for other than squadron duties. This makes it difficult to compete with nonrated peers, who may be working in an office environment, with shorter duty days.

I heard of several instances when some of our best pilots have departed the Air Force, in large measure because of passover for promotion because they did not meet some of these requirements. A case in point is J. M., an outstanding pilot and leader, considered a living legend by

all in his squadron. He was not passed over, however he recently chose to leave the Air Force and fly in the National Guard. His motivation was not more pay (he did not go to the airlines), he simply wanted to spend more time flying.

Efforts should continue toward reducing the number of non-flying related requirements placed on aircrew members. Also, the emphasis, for promotion purposes, should be shifted in favor of rewarding the fighter pilot for executing his primary responsibility to the country: training to fly, fight and win!

3. Pass The Word On Excellence--Firsthand

The excellent squadrons are characterized by timely and accurate communication so that everyone is informed and knows what is expected from the squadron's leadership. The chain of command is not ignored, however, the excellent commanders find it worthwhile to meet in direct communication with their people. I believe the same principle can be applied to the overall TAC organization. The 51 senior officers interviewed have a clear and uniform vision of excellence. This vision embodies TAC leadership's expectations of squadrons' performance. This should be communicated directly to the squadrons whenever possible so that each squadron member knows what is really expected by his/her command leadership. It's one thing to infer the criteria for excellence by reading TAC regulations, inspection checklists or just through "experience and common sense." It's quite another matter for a captain or a staff sergeant to hear a senior officer's views directly from that officer. In the first instance, he/she is reading words, in the second case, that captain or sergeant will experience an idea. In both cases the same thoughts may be expressed but the difference is immense! One aspect of this research I

will not soon forget is the experience of hearing, firsthand, the wisdom of the senior officers interviewed. Other students (junior officers) here at the Naval Postgraduate School who have completed studies of excellence in other services report similar thoughts after interviewing their senior officers.

I recommend that other junior officers and enlisted personnel be given greater opportunities to meet with and hear the views of TAC's leaders. This could be done through one-on-one or small group seminars at Wing, Numbered AF or TAC Headquarters, as part of a reward for excellent performance. It could also be done through addresses on leadership, excellence, etc., presented by the senior officers, for example, during base visits. The method may vary, but the basic ingredients should be informality, candidness and a two-way exchange. The idea is to pass the word on excellence--firsthand.

4. Promote And Emphasize Traditions And Heritage

A significant finding of this reserach is the extensive role which tradition and heritage play in the performance of the excellent squadrons. Emphasis on tradition and heritage does not mean living in the past or holding to non-productive ways of doing business. Instead, it is a way of enhancing unit pride, maintaining a sense of distinctiveness and building cohesion. More important, it is a vehicle for perpetuating and maintaining excellence. Heritage, remains a potent and authoritative reminder of the high standards of the past, instilling in each member a sense of history and his/her responsibility to continue that tradition of excellence. But, heritage must be systematically transmitted to new [squadron] members and periodically reinforced in older members" (Bickel, et al, p. 32).

Unfortunately, many within the defense establishment ignore the significance of ritual and ceremony and do not see value in anything which cannot fit a cost benefit equation or produce a direct quantifiable result. Recent reductions in the number of military marching bands (Bickel, et al, p. 96) is an example. Another case is the TAC restriction on the pilot crush in the flight cap. Although seemingly insignificant, this "crush" is an item of distinction, significant to many in the tactical fighter community.

Squadron commanders should consider perpetuation and maintenance of squadron heritage as an important responsibility. Distinctive items of dress, which do not offend good taste or threaten safety should also be allowed.

5. Exploit Creativity And Talent In The Squadron

In many instances, many of the innovative ideas I've reported were the result of "a couple of captains" getting together. An important lesson from the excellent squadrons is that the talent and creativity are already there and need only be nourished and allowed to grow in an environment where ideas are encouraged and mistakes tolerated. Squadron leaders should recognize this and take action to allow this creativity to flourish.

Further, these ideas should be crossfed between squadrons. The ideas and special programs highlighted in this research are but a few of the approaches squadrons have adopted to improve performance. However, when asked if other squadrons were aware of these innovations, most people responded in the negative or with uncertainty. I recommend that a mechanism be established to recognize the authors of these programs and to make others aware of how they can institute similar programs elsewhere. This can be accomplished through networking among squadron commanders,

especially during commander's conferences or via a TAC publication similar to those used to publicize flight safety and maintenance issues.

6. Recognize And Acknowledge The Excellence Family

Excellence consists of more than the squadron and its aircrews. The enlisted cadre and the maintenance specialists, although not performing duties in the air, are nevertheless critical to any squadron's success. In fact, excellence cannot be achieved without their dedication and support, as the excellent squadrons have illustrated.

The excellent squadrons also recognize the importance of the family. The emphasis on 10-hour days, newsletters and time spent on communication with spouses stem from a realization that the family is also part of the squadron. This attitude toward the family is consistent with the literature. In the book, Social Psychology of Military Service, researchers cite family related variables, namely the attitude of the spouse as one of the variables important to servicemen's adjustment to the military, retention, and job efficiency (Goldman, pp. 135-148).

The so-called "support groups," i.e., enlisted personnel, maintenance specialists and families, should be viewed not as support but as integral members of the excellence family and treated accordingly.

B. FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research has focused on excellence from the standpoint of the excellent squadrons only. Further research using a comparative study of excellent as well as average squadrons should be conducted. Also, a quantitative methodology emphasizing questionnaires, inspection and monthly quantitative measures, should be employed.

Also, what about other Air Force operational units? Do these same findings apply to Military Airlift Command (MAC), or Strategic Air Command (SAC). A similar study of these commands should be conducted.

APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGY

My initial interest in studying excellence in tactical fighter squadrons was stimulated by the best seller "In Search Of Excellence, Lessons From America's Best Run Companies," by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. In their research, the authors found that the top performing American corporations possessed certain common identifiable attributes of excellence.

My research questions were: does the same apply to tactical fighter squadrons? ²¹ Do the top performing tactical fighter squadrons also possess common attributes of excellence which set them apart from average squadrons? If so, what are those attributes?

Unlike business corporations where excellence can be judged in terms of growth and the bottom-line dollar figures on financial statements, tactical fighter squadrons can only be truly judged based on performance in combat. Consequently, in today's peacetime environment, one has to look at other indicators to discriminate the top performers.

Which squadrons are excellent? Who should be the judge of excellence and, what criteria should be used? I chose to let a consensus of TAC's most senior and experienced officers answer these questions since, short of combat, it is the views of these senior leaders and policy makers which determines excellence. How is excellence achieved? The best qualified to answer this question are those squadrons

²¹This is part of a broader study of excellence in military units headed by Professor Reuben Harris at the Naval Postgraduate School. Professor Harris is investigating the attributes of excellence in operational Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard units.

deemed excellent by their senior leaders.

To derive the senior officers' excellence criteria and to tell the story of how excellence is achieved in the top performing tactical fighter squadrons, I used a two-part qualitative research methodology. A qualitative methodology, i.e., interviews, was selected because it offers a richness of data (a more complete description of excellence) not available through quantitative research techniques.

A. PART I--THE EXCELLENCE CRITERIA

Attached to introductory letters, I forwarded copies of my thesis proposal, addressed personally to 16 senior TAC operational commanders, and 4 functional staff heads at HQ TAC, requesting permission to interview that officer and key members of his staff. One hundred percent of the officers responded favorably. Unavailability due to TDY precluded two interviews.

In selecting senior officers to be interviewed, my criteria were:

- a) Rank of lieutenant colonel (O-5) or above.
- b) Prior experience as a fighter squadron commander and or currently serving in a fighter squadron evaluator position, e.g., Inspector General staff, or Director of Operations.
- c) Currently assigned to wing level or higher, i.e., Numbered Air Forces Headquarters or HQ TAC.

From 7 September to 7 December 1984, a total of 51 senior TAC officers were interviewed at 12 TAC CONUS bases:

| Number of Officers Interviewed | Rank |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | General (O-10) |
| 3 | Lt Gen (O- 9) |
| 2 | M Gen (O- 8) |
| 3 | B Gen (O- 7) |

32
10

Colonel (O- 6) ^{2 2}
Lt Col (O- 5)

All interviews were conducted individually with the exception of two separate instances when two officers were interviewed together. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2-1/2 hours (average of one hour). Every officer, except one, gave permission for tape recording of his interview. Interviews were structured around the following questions:

- a) How do you judge tactical fighter squadrons?
- b) What do you look for in deciding which is best?
- c) What characteristics do the top-notch squadrons display that sets them apart?

Follow-up questions were asked to clarify and elaborate on certain points.

At the end of each interview, with the recorder off, I asked each officer to nominate squadrons they believed embodied excellence. Although all the senior officers had a clear vision of excellence, the majority gave only one or two nominations, while some declined to give any nominations, as they felt they were too far removed from day-to-day squadron business.

| <u>Number of Senior Officers Interviewed</u> | <u>Number of Squadrons Nominated as Excellent</u> |
|--|---|
| 6 | 0 (declined to give nomination) |
| 20 | 1 |
| 15 | 2 |
| 6 | 3 |
| 4 | 4 |

Of the squadrons nominated as excellent, seven received at least five nominations. My selection of these seven squadrons was based on the frequency of nominations as well as the intensity of the nominations. For example, in giving

^{2 2}Eleven of the 32 colonels interviewed were Tactical Fighter Wing Commanders. TDY funding and time constraints did not allow visits to the other Tactical Fighter Wing Commanders.

his nomination, one senior officer asserted: "Capt Forde, if you want to see excellence, you MUST visit" TDY funding and time limitations allowed visits to only four squadrons. My final selection of those four excellent squadrons was driven by a desire to visit squadrons in a variety of locations, flying different aircraft.

B. PART II--THE STORY OF EXCELLENCE

I contacted the commanders of the four squadrons and made arrangements for a two-day visit. I emphasized that no special preparations be made as I wanted to observe day-to-day operations and not in any way disrupt normal activity. In each squadron I interviewed the commander and the operations officer. Additionally, I interviewed a cross section of the squadron which included flight commanders, flying and non-flying (enlisted and officer) personnel, new arrivals and people who were close to reassignment. All interviews were subject to availability based on the flying schedule. In total 43 squadron members were interviewed, usually individually, however, there were three two-person and one four-person interviews. The commanders' interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours, all others averaged 30 to 50 minutes.

Interviews were structured around the following questions:

- a) What factors do you think are responsible for this squadron being considered excellent?
- b) What stories and examples from the squadron illustrate excellence?
- c) If a new person were coming into this squadron, and asked you what you liked most/least about this squadron, what would you say?
- d) What is your feeling about certain issues such as:
 1. looking good vs. being good (AFR 35-10);
 2. Professional Military Education (PME);

3. relationship with the Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU) and;
4. competition vs. cohesion?

I asked additional clarifying questions as necessary.

Between interviews, I participated in as many squadron activities as possible. Depending on the flying schedule, I did not do everything in each squadron, however, I observed pre-flight briefings, debriefings, morning-mass briefings, pre-deployment activities such as hot preflights on the flight line, and generally listened to and observed the squadrons' routine, especially near the operations desk. I also played darts in the lounge, ate lunch and dinners, whenever possible with squadron personnel, and spoke to some of the maintenance specialists on the flight line.^{2 3} Informal exchanges during these times provided a rich source of data to supplement the interviews.

C. ANALYSIS OF DATA

Parts I and II were treated as separate, independent units.

In analyzing the interview comments from each part, the written tape transcripts (a total of over 1,330 double spaced pages) were reviewed several times. Those comments pertinent to understanding/explaining excellence were highlighted and labeled with a short topic sentence, depending on the thrust of the speakers comments. In most cases words used by the interviewee were also used in the topic sentence.

All topic sentences were listed in a series of columns and distilled several times on different days, into what became the chapter and subtitle headings. For example, many

^{2 3}Due to the flying schedule, I did not do everything in each squadron.

in the four squadrons made comments relating to preparation for war, readiness, performance, realistic training, etc. These became topic sentences. These topic sentences, and many others related to the idea of preparation for war were distilled into the chapter heading "Combat Capability Is First Priority."

Data from Part I was analyzed and findings summarized in Chapters II to V, then, with Part I completed, I began work on the interview transcripts from Part II, following the same procedures. Each part was reviewed and revised several times based on discussions with Professor Harris and Thesis Co-Advisor, Professor Louis Armijo. Conclusions and recommendations were written last.

D. EXCELLENT SQUADRONS NOT IDENTIFIED

My objective was not to tell which units are excellent but to tell the story of what the excellent squadrons are doing, to provide a model of excellence for others. Thus, the story of the four squadrons is told anonymously.

Also, I did not include a sample of 'average' squadrons in this study simply because my interest was in studying excellence, which by definition, is not found in the average squadrons.

APPENDIX B
A TYPICAL FIGHTER SQUADRON

A typical fighter squadron is usually one of three squadrons in a tactical fighter wing. Each squadron is commanded by a lieutenant colonel (O-5) and has approximately 24 aircraft assigned. Aircrew manning levels are 1.25 to 1.30 times the number of aircraft.

Thus, for a squadron flying single-seat aircraft such as the F-15, F-16, A-10, this means 30 to 32 pilots; for a two-seat F-4 squadron, this means approximately 62 total pilots and weapon system operators. The squadron commander and operations officer are additional overhead manning. Each squadron is subdivided into flights, each commanded by a captain (O-3) or major (O-4) flight commander.

In addition to the compliment of flying personnel, the typical squadron has a non-flying adjutant second or first lieutenant and approximately 15 enlisted personnel who perform operations analysis (tracking and reporting flying-related data), life support, and administrative functions as well as mobility preparation and chemical decontamination activities.

Maintenance for each squadron is provided by a dedicated Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU). Each AMU has the same number designation as its associated fighter squadron and is responsible for maintenance on that squadron's aircraft only. While on station the AMU is under the authority of the Wing Deputy Commander for Maintenance (O-6). During wartime deployment, command of the AMU transfers to the flying squadron commander or his representative at the deployment location.

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